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A Seat at the Table: A Phenomenological Study of the Gap in African American/Black Women with Nonprofit Executive Leadership Roles

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With Nonprofit Executive Leadership Roles

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of African American/Black women leaders in the nonprofit business sector in the Pacific Northwest. The intent was to understand how their experiences of inequitable opportunities in the workplace prohibited them from attaining and retaining executive leadership roles. A qualitative, transcendental phenomenological approach was used to explore the career pathway trajectory for African American/Black women in the nonprofit sector, to capture the essence of their experiences navigating inequities along the leadership pipeline. To examine their experiences, critical race theory and social cognitive career theory provided a multifaceted viewpoint of African American/Black women in the context of their identities in relation to their roles in leadership. A conceptual framework also guided this study through the lens of the phenomenon of being identified as a "problem" woman of color in the workplace as they identified inequities in the organizations in which they worked. Research about the phenomenon reflected a significant portion of women of color leave their jobs when attempting to resolve conflicts stemming from their experiences with microaggressions, tokenization, and racist practices, leaving a gap in the leadership of nonprofit organizations and a lack of representation for the populations being served. This study drew exclusively from a network of African American/Black women who served as executive leaders in the nonprofit sector in the Pacific Northwest, particularly Washington state.

Keywords: African American, Black, women, nonprofit, leadership, top-level, executive, microaggression, oppression, career, representation, transcendental phenomenology

Acknowledgements

No matter what accomplishments you make, somebody helped you.

—Althea Gibson

The doctoral journey was one of the most difficult feats in my life; yet, I was blessed to have a circle of friends and supporters to remind me daily that they believed in me, that I could make it to the finish line, and that the reward would be greater than I could ever imagine. My best friends, Dr. Lawonda Smith and Trise Moore, have demonstrated tenacity in working toward and earning their doctorate degrees while juggling full-time careers, raising children, and honoring their husbands. My dissertation team, Dr. Shukri Olow and Anissa Heard-Johnson, joined me in countless hours of identifying our initial research plans and supporting each other during each step of the process toward defending our dissertations. My writing partner, Keya Burks, met with me every morning at 6:30 am to ensure I stayed on track toward completing my goal. My prayer warriors, Ms. Bernice, Mrs. Hunter, Seiglinde, Pastor Derozette, and everyone else on my momma's call list. My dissertation committee, Dr. Colette Taylor, Dr. Lauren Thomas-Quigley, and Dr. Holly Slay Ferraro displayed confidence in my research and guidance along the way. A great contributor to my initial research process, Dr. Keisha Scarlett. And lastly, the eight phenomenal women who shared their lived experiences with racial inequities and social injustices in hopes of ensuring more African American/Black women secure seats at the leadership tables of nonprofit organizations to support better outcomes for our children, families, and communities of color.

Dedication

I dedicate this doctoral dissertation to the many strong and brilliant African American/Black women in my life who have stood in front, behind, and alongside me during my academic journey. My mother, Mary Jane Davis, has been a trailblazer in the pursuit of academic excellence by crossing the lines of segregation to become one of the first to graduate from the all-White high school in her small east Texas hometown. And my daughters, Dominique, Nila, and Gabrielle who motivate me to be a role model in accessing equitable educational opportunities at the highest level possible. I also dedicate this body of work to the significant men who lovingly supported my journey, my husband T. Damon Griffin and my son Theo Griffin. And my daddy, who I know is celebrating with me from heaven, the late Donald Ray Davis, Sr. Last but not least, I am dedicated to always doing my work as unto the Lord, so I recognize the wisdom and ability I had to complete this step in my life's journey was possible through my faith in my Father God, His son Jesus Christ, and my inner guide the Holy Spirit.

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Chapter 1. Introduction

The U.S. business sector has a long history of defining leadership through a lens of Whiteness and maleness. Between 2015 and 2020, there was a slight upswing for women being identified and promoted to senior management positions in the private corporate sector. Yet, for every 100 men who experienced promotion to managerial positions, only 85 women were promoted. The promotional experiences for women reflect about a 2% incremental change over the past 5 years, and have been mainly attributed to a reinvigorated push toward gender equality in the workplace (McKinsey & Company, 2020). The incremental shift of women gaining representation in corporate America is even more menial for African American/Black women, who continue to face the more barriers to advancement in the private corporate sector than any other employee group. One would think there are greater opportunities for African American/Black women in the nonprofit sector, given that over the past decade many organizations in the industry have been required to demonstrate their policies, practices, and culture are aligned with the values of diversity, inclusion, and equity to secure grants and funding (Thomas-Breitfeld & Kunreuther, 2017). Yet, studies show a prevailing racial equity gap in the nonprofit sector that mirrors the corporate sector despite increased racial diversity in communities across the nation. They also reflect a significant number of people of color believe their race or ethnicity has negatively impacted their career trajectory, leaving a gap in racial diversity at the top of these organizations (Bui, 2019).

One of the main barriers African American/Black women experience along their career trajectory is hitting the proverbial "glass ceiling," an invisible barrier that hinders them from reaching upper-level positions in the workplace despite qualifications and skills (Davis & Maldonado, 2015; Smith, 2012). In many cases, these women find themselves up against a

"concrete" rather than glass ceiling when seeking the highest level of organizational leadership as the chief executive officer (CEO) or other C-suite level positions (Dickens et al., 2018). The terminology shift from glass to concrete ceilings implies even within the same gender construct of being a woman, their race plays a more significant role in shifting growth opportunities from being visible but unattainable, to being invisible and unwelcomed to consideration for an organization's leadership role (Cook & Glass, 2013). In many cases, White women can make room at the metaphorical "table" for African American/Black women to use their qualifications and skills in decision making and thought leadership. Yet, they are not getting up to release their seats to allow for increased diversity of representation in nonprofit organizations' top-level leadership roles (Wallace, 2019).

Another significant barrier has been identified in the past 5 years as the phenomenon of the "problem" woman of colour in the workplace, with an infographic tool that illuminates the disproportionate experiences for women of color in the workplace. It starts with the woman of color entering the workplace in a "honeymoon" phase, initially feeling welcomed and valued. As she begins experiencing forms of oppression such as microaggressions, the woman of color transitions to a stage of expressing their experiences and pushing for accountability of those responsible for oppressive, and even racist, actions. She is met with targeted retaliation that depicts her as a problem employee, and no longer qualified or not a good fit for the organization, which leads to her leaving the organization either voluntarily or involuntarily. The phenomenon has potential implications on the gap of African American/Black women obtaining and retaining top leadership roles in organizations, as the mid-level leadership roles are the ones where they can express and push for accountability when racialized oppression is identified (Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010). As African American/Black women find themselves stuck at the mid-level in

their careers due to racially oppressive experiences in the workplace, there continues to be a gap in top-level leadership roles that reflects a clear misrepresentation of the growth in the population of African American/Black people in the U.S. workforce.

Statement of the Problem

Between 1997 and 2017, the U.S. population increased by 20%, from 267 million to 320 million. Although White Americans continued to represent the largest racial and ethnic group in the United States (71.9% in 1997, and down to 61% in 2017), their share of the overall population has decreased as the country became more diverse (Espinosa et al., 2019). Since 2014, African Americans have accounted for 13.2% of the U.S. population, and are estimated to double in size by 2060 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). According to data analyzed from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, African Americans' growth in the workforce is projected to be 4 times that of White Americans (.08% compared to .02%) between 2018 and 2028 (Hancock et al., 2021). Even as African Americans increase in population size and workforce representation, the roles that are making organizational decisions, such as CEO in a Fortune 500 company or executive director of a nonprofit organization, are meager and disproportionate to the population (Dubose, 2014).

The nonprofit sector has a moral and programmatic imperative to ensure the top-level leaders of organizations are representative of the nation's growing diversity. According to the National Council of Nonprofits (2021), over 1.5 million nonprofit organizations serve a charitable purpose of providing food, shelter, education, and resources to communities of color in the United States; these nonprofits empower leadership through civic engagement and drive economic growth. They also contribute to the creation of more equitable and thriving communities. Reports on the nonprofit sector reflect over 60% of nonprofits predominately serve

people of color; yet, only 17% of their CEO or executive director roles are filled by people of color (McKeever, 2018; Suarez, 2017). It is a disservice to communities of color to mirror the dismal leadership representation in the corporate sector. African Americans/Blacks only represented 1% of the Fortune 500 companies' CEO roles. As of 2021, there has also only ever been three African American/Black women in the CEO roles of the top 500 corporations in the United States; whereas, the overall national representation of women in the corporate sector has slowly increased to 5% more women in senior leadership roles and 4% more in top-level or C-suite positions (McKinsey & Company, 2020).

Despite the increase of women in top-level leadership roles in the overall private corporate business sector, the growth trajectory remains disproportionate for African American/Black women in top-level executive positions, even in nonprofit organizations serving predominately communities of color. The African American/Black woman's voice remains absent in seats at the tables where top-level leaders shape the business' organizational culture, financial success, and positive outcomes for community members (Wallace, 2019). They do not represent the growing African American/Black population in the workforce with executive-level roles that provide an opportunity along the career path toward becoming a CEO or executive director (Hunt et al., 2020). The disproportionate growth trajectory for African American/Black women indicates a gap in their leadership pipeline as they continue hitting the glass and concrete ceilings.

The proverbial glass ceiling has been translated to the "glass cliff," with African American/Black women identifying how workplace discrimination can lead to a decision to "jump off" or disengage from top leadership roles from defeat and discouragement (Beckwith et al., 2016; Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010). African American/Black women face the duality of

race and gender bias in the workplace, presenting many challenges from barriers to promotion to obstacles for career growth (Parker, 2002; Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010). The lived experiences of African American/Black women deserve further exploration into how the inequities of microaggressions or daily experiences of discrimination impact their limited progression on a trajectory toward top-level leadership in the nonprofit sector. The implications of a research study that engaged African American/Black women in an investigation of the experiences that contributed to their ability to attain and retain top-level leadership roles in the nonprofit sector helped inform the necessary changes along the career pathway of these women to ensure they are justly positioned as representatives of an increasingly diverse workforce.

Purpose of the Study

This research aimed to explore the lived experiences of African American/Black women leaders in the nonprofit business sector in the Pacific Northwest. The intent was to understand how their experiences were related to the disproportionate number of African American/Black women in mid- to senior-level leadership roles, and the lack of equitable opportunities in the workplace prohibiting them from advancing to executive leadership roles. A qualitative, phenomenological approach was used to explore the career pathway trajectory for African American/Black women in the nonprofit sector, and their experiences navigating the leadership pipeline.

The following questions guided this qualitative study:

Research Question 1: How have African American/Black women's lived experiences impacted their attainment and retention of executive-level leadership roles in the nonprofit business sector?

Research Question 2: What strategies, environments, and resources support African

American/Black women in attaining and retaining executive leadership roles in the nonprofit business sector?

Theoretical Framework

The selected research questions guided this study in exploring how the lived experiences through racialized inequities in the workplace of African American/Black women have impacted their attainment and retention of top-level leadership roles in the nonprofit business sectors. To examine the experiences of African American/Black women that impacted their leadership career pathway, critical race theory (CRT; Bell, 1995) and social cognitive career theory (SCCT; Lent et al., 1994) provided a multifaceted viewpoint of African American/Black women in the context of their identities in relation to their roles in leadership (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Theoretical Framework
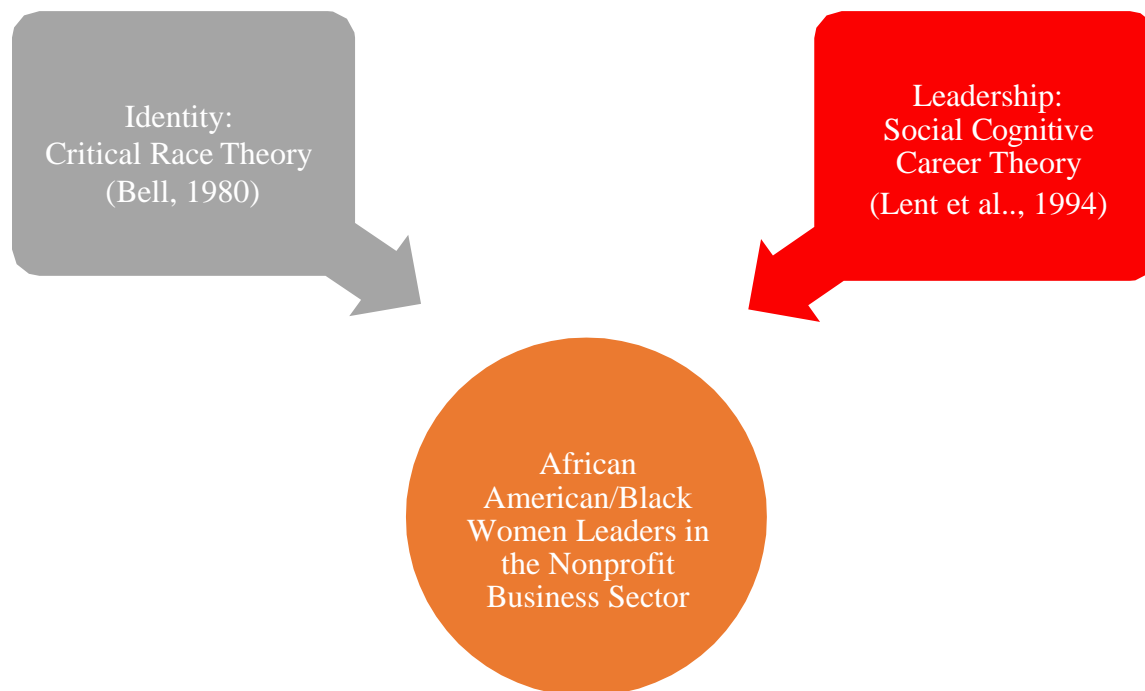
CRT

To understand the experiences of women in the leadership through an African American/Black lens, CRT addresses the concerns of racism and racial discrimination (Bell, 1995). Originally founded as a response to a delayed civil rights movement in the United States, this theory targeted detrimental laws by exposing racial inequities supported by U.S. policy (Tate, 1997). CRT provides an examination of how entrenched racism is in the fabric of the culture for people of color in the United States (Delgaldo & Stefancic, 2012). Focusing on the socially constructed and broad nature of race, CRT considers racism constant and normal in U.S. society. It also provides rich context of African American/Black women's leadership experiences through the lens of race and racism as integral to all aspects of the research process (Creswell & Poth, 2007; Hartman, 2018). In the exploration of the impact of tokenism, microaggressions, and targeted racism on the career pipeline of African American/Black women in organizations, CRT provides a critical perspective on how they are affected by the causes, consequences, and manifestations of race, racism, and inequality in the workplace.

The literature on CRT guides how African American/Black women can break through racism and discrimination barriers by sharing the counter stories to the stereotypes that keep them marginalized and disenfranchised (Delgaldo & Stefancic, 2012; Hartman, 2018; Steele, 2010). In an examination of the intersectionality of race and gender, CRT provides the researcher additional context and approaches to challenge bias, privilege, and positionality in the analytical process of capturing and addressing the lived experiences of the participants in the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Delgaldo & Stefancic, 2012). Conducting a qualitative research study with semistructured interviews aligns with CRT by creating the opportunity for African American/Black women to share their lived experiences of tokenism, microaggressions, and

racism in the workplace that impacts their ability to make progress along their career trajectory (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

SCCT

SCCT expands on Bandura's (1986) social cognitive theory in relation to career development. Introduced by Lent et al. (1994), SCCT provides insight for specific career development behaviors, including decision making, performance, and persistence. Their research was on the self-efficacy beliefs that shape the attitudes and behaviors impacting individuals' career choices is an expansion of social cognitive theory identified by Bandura in 1986. Specifically, Bandura's (1996) theory suggested self-efficacy beliefs are developed from and adapted through four experiential sources: personal performance accomplishments, vicarious learning, socially persuasive communication, and affective arousal experienced while completing a task (Byars-Winston & Rogers, 2019). Social cognitive theory focuses on career development based on motivation, specific behaviors, and the environment. SCCT provides an understanding of what contributes to the pathway they may choose, and how they make career decisions in establishing a career trajectory (Lent et al., 1994).

As African American/Black women make career decisions along a trajectory of leadership, SCCT highlights the underlying behaviors that should break down the barriers of tokenism, microaggressions, and targeted racism to support the attainment and retention of top-level leadership roles in the private business sector (Scheuermann et al., 2014). Through an iteration of inquiry models, the most recent literature on SCCT guides how African American/Black women can deploy their self-efficacy beliefs to self-manage and adapt their behaviors along with the lifespan of their career trajectory toward high-prestige occupations, such as top-level leadership and executive roles (Lent & Brown, 2017; Scheuermann et al.,

2014). A literature review on organizational leadership through the lens of SCCT informs the research questions of this study that provide the framework for analyzing African American/Black women's lived experiences in correlation with the phenomenon of the "problem" woman of colour in the workplace.

CRT and SCCT collectively guided this study in capturing African American/Black women's authentic voices in their pursuit, attainment, and even loss of top-level leadership roles. Given most models of feministic perspectives in leadership are based on White women's gender identity, the African American/Black woman's experiences in constructing gender identity is limited in the research (Parker, 2001). To ensure the African American/Black woman's voice was included in the theorizing on leadership, the theoretical framework of this research study placed their experiences at the center of the research analysis, ensuring they were positioned through the intersectional lens of race and gender.

Significance of the Study

This dissertation provided additional research to explain the challenge African American/Black women face when they have the advantages of increasing their leadership skills, but are disadvantaged in securing and maintaining significant roles along the leadership pipeline across multiple workforce sectors. According to previous research studies, many strategies have guided African American/Black women along the leadership pipeline; yet, no one succinct route exists (Beckwith et al., 2016; Bui, 2019; Hoyt & Murphy, 2015). A combination of changing population dynamics and instances of individual prejudice, organizational bias, and societal stereotypes has resulted in a gendered racial incongruence for African American women leaders. Further study may help identify common traits and possible resolutions to overcome the known

challenges faced by African American/Black women on the career pathway to top-level leadership roles in the private corporate business sector.

Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations

This section identifies assumptions, limitations, and delimitations of the study. The limitations of this study included:

- A small sample size of eight participants for the researcher to spend more time investigating the lived experiences of each participant.

- The participants' responses were self-reported data, which could have been biased based on their experiences' one-sided perspective.

- Participants' availability and disposition to participate in three rounds of interviews during the COVID-19 global pandemic, which restricted personal interactions.

- Participants of this study were mid- to executive-level leaders who managed several priorities during the COVID-19 global pandemic.

The delimitations of this study included:

- The sample of participants was delimited to a large urban area in the Pacific Northwest, predominately Washington state, which may create difficulty for replicating this study in another context.

- The sample of participants was delimited to a small selection of African American/Black women leaders in the nonprofit sector, limiting the demographic sample.

Definitions of Terms

Black or African American. A person having origins in any of the Black racial groups of Africa. Terms such as "Haitian" or "Negro'' can be used in addition to "Black or African

American." Black was defined as "persons who identify as having a collective radicalized experience in the United States based upon their perceived African ancestry" (Dominque, 2015, p. 458), inclusive of ethnicities such as African American, Caribbean, and pan-African.

C-suite. Refers to top senior executives whose titles start with C, such as chief executive officer, chief operating officer, and chief information officer (Cook & Glass, 2016).

Ethnicity. As race relates to physical features (e.g., skin tone, hair texture, eye color, bone structure), ethnicity is a social construct related to nationality, region, ancestry, shared culture, and language (Bell et al., 2016).

Equity. In education, equity is defined as "the idea that students from historically and contemporarily marginalized and minoritized communities have access to what they need to be successful" (Castro, 2015, p. 6).

Gender identity. How a person identifies own gender, typically using the terms boy/man, girl/woman, which may or may not align with the sex assigned to one's body at birth (Adams et al., 2018).

Mid-level. Examples of mid-level employment positions include director, manager, and supervisor (Eagly & Karau, 2002).

Microaggression. Conscious, unconscious, verbal, nonverbal, subtle, and visual forms of insults directed toward people of color are called microaggressions. Microaggressions are a form of everyday suffering that has been socially and systemically normalized, and in effect, minimized (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012).

Oppression. The interlocking multileveled system that consolidates social power to the benefit of members of privileged groups, and is maintained and operationalized on three dimensions: contextual (i.e., individual, institutional, and social/cultural); conscious and

unconscious (i.e., intentional and unintentional); and applied (i.e., attitudes and behaviors, policies, practices, norms, values, beliefs, and customs; Hardiman et al., 2007).

Race. The sociopolitical construct was created to justify peoples' dominance defined as White (e.g., colonists/settlers) over other peoples defined as racially different or inferior (Adams et al., 2016.

Racism. Conscious or unconscious beliefs, attitudes, and actions that denigrate people based on their race. Set of institutional, cultural, and interpersonal patterns and practices that created advantages for people legally defined and socially constructed as "White," and corollary disadvantages for people defined as belonging to racial groups that were not considered Whites by the dominant power structure in the United States (Adams et al., 2016).

Senior/executive level. Examples of senior-level employment positions include president, vice-president, and chief officer positions (Eagly & Karau, 2002).

Stereotype threat. Describes the fear of confirming negative stereotypes about racial, ethnic, gender, or cultural groups (Steele, 2010).

Organization of the Study

Chapter 1 introduced the reader to the inequities faced by African American/Black women along a career trajectory toward top-level leadership roles in the nonprofit sector. It drew a connection between the intersections of race and gender in the lack of leadership representation despite the growth in the African American/Black population in the United States. It also reflected the gap with their increase in the workforce. An exploration of the phenomenon of experiencing racial oppression and discrimination in the workplace will potentially provide an understanding of the contributing factors to a disproportionate and slow progression along the career trajectory toward top-level leadership in the nonprofit sector by African American/Black

women. Chapter 2 outlines the conceptual and theoretical frameworks that shape the study's direction, and provide an understanding of the phenomenon through the identities of race and gender and the contributions of organizational leadership design and culture that have historically been oppressive and marginalizing to women and people of color. Chapter 3 outlines the process of completing the study and informs the conceptualization of the phenomenon on African American/Black women's career trajectory in the nonprofit sector. Further, Chapter 3 describes the rationale of a transcendental phenomenological qualitative study, and the sampling procedures, instrumentation, and methodology for data collection and analysis.

Chapter 2. Literature Review

Chapter 2 is a review of literature intended to conceptualize the research data through the lens of African American/Black women who have held executive or top-level leadership roles in the nonprofit business sector. This chapter is organized as follows: (a) the conceptual framework of the phenomenon of the "problem" woman of colour in the workplace, (b) organizational leadership, (c) the intersection of gender and race in leadership, and (d) the leadership career pipeline that reflects the prevalence of a gap in top-level leadership roles for African American/Black women in organizations.

Conceptual Framework

There is a distinct systemic experience for African American/Black women as they join the minuscule group of women of color at the leadership tables of organizations across all business sectors. It is essential to differentiate African American/Black women's experiences from women in general, and the conglomeration of women of color, to understand the disproportionate workplace gap associated with racism and oppression that impacts their career trajectory (P. Collins, 2000). Possibly the most challenging experience African American/Black women face in the workplace is covert and overt racism. As this paper is being written, overt racism is prevailing in the United States. It has the potential of impacting the continuance of African American/Black women being underrepresented in the private corporate sector (Bell, 1990; McKinsey & Company, 2020). Even with racism being a significant part of the overall African American/Black experience for hundreds of years, covert racism has been much different from the blatant acts of discrimination and hostility experienced over the past 4 years.

The former covert racist experiences of African American/Black people created challenges of making a claim of racism in the workplace. Yet, experiences of oppressive, racist

behavior have been more direct over the past few decades, and present potential barriers in moving successfully on the trajectory toward executive leadership for African American/Black women who seek support in addressing such behavior (Dubose, 2014; Hartman, 2018). As African American/Black women move along their career pipeline, they often find themselves faced with the phenomenon of being categorized as the "problem" woman of colour in the workplace (see Figure 2), particularly when positioned with any level of authority they may perceive gives them a voice to express concerns of inequity. Being depicted as the "problem" woman of colour in the workplace has potential implications on the gap of African American/Black women obtaining and retaining top leadership roles in nonprofit organizations.

Figure 2. The "Problem" Woman of Colour in the Workplace Tool
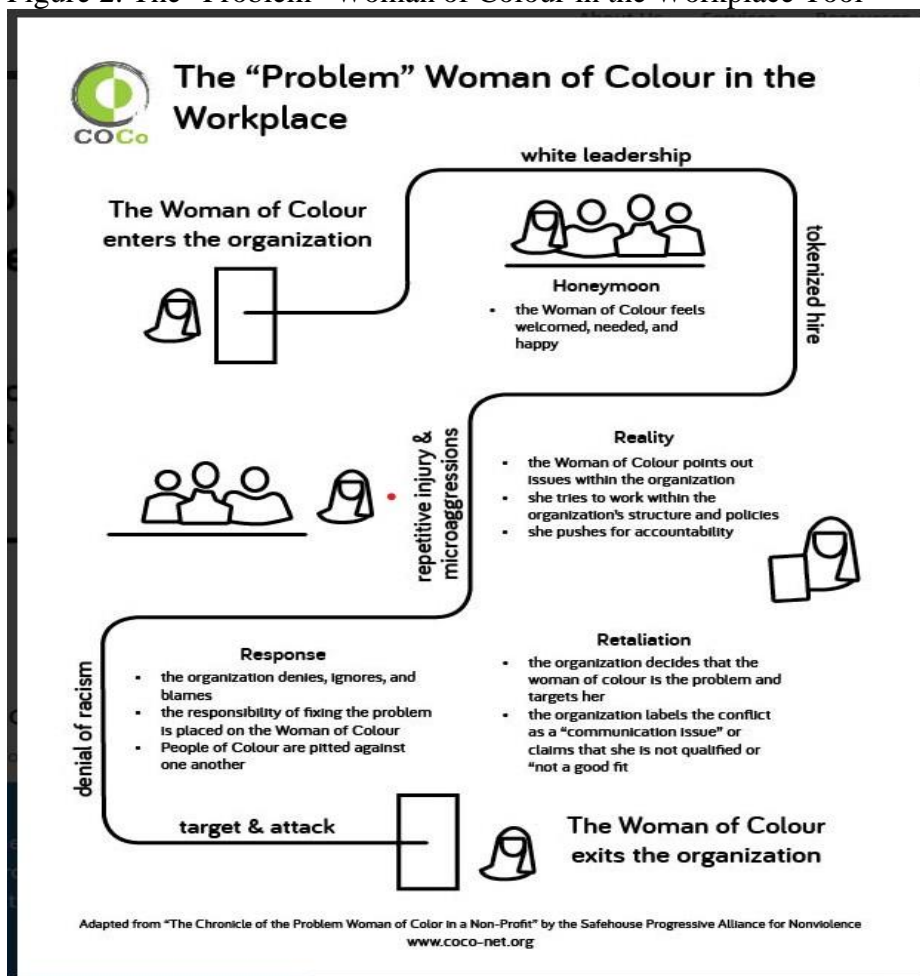
Note. Reprinted from "The 'Problem' Woman of Colour in Nonprofit Organizations," by K.

Page, 2018 (https://coco-net.org/problem-woman-colour-nonprofit-

organizations/#:~:text=Below%20is%20an%20overview%20of%20the%20outlined%20trajector

y,position%20and%20feels%20welcomed%20in%20her%20new%20workplace).

This study was shaped by the phenomenon introduced through The "Problem" Woman of

Colour in the Workplace tool (see Figure 2), as adapted by the Centre for Community

Organizations (Page, 2018). The Centre for Community Organizations conducted an initial

survey, with findings that empirically supported what The "Problem" Woman of Colour in the

Workplace tool depicts about the experience for women of color specifically working in nonprofit organizations. That data reflected a significant portion of women of color leaving their jobs due to an unwelcoming environment. In contrast, most White women reported leaving their jobs for better ones or wanting to spend quality time with their families. Women of color's phenomenon are seen as a problem when they express concerns about the unwelcome environment that has left many without jobs or being cut off from advancement that might have been part of their career trajectory plan (Page, 2018). It starts with the woman of color entering the workplace in a honeymoon phase of feeling welcomed and valued. They become tokenized, which involves being showcased as superficial representations of diversity in the workplace (Holder et al., 2015). In many cases the only one in an organization, industry, or region, the African American/Black woman leader is treated as symbols of representation for all women of color in leadership roles and called upon when representation is needed for appearance rather than thought leadership (Dickens et al., 2018).

The experience of oppression, such as microaggressions, transitions the woman of color to using her opportunities for representation to express her experiences to decision makers in the organization. She begins pushing for accountability of those responsible for oppressive and even racist actions. African American/Black women are too often faced with addressing racial microaggressions. These microaggressions show up in three forms: (a) microassaults, as overt discriminatory verbal and nonverbal attacks; (b) microinsults, as behaviors or comments that degrade an individual's racial identity; or (c) microinvalidations, as the negating or denial of a person of color's thoughts, experiences, and feelings (Sue et al., 2008). Persistent experiences with these microaggression behaviors have been shown to impact mental health with manifestations that include anxiety, depression, lack of confidence, helplessness, and false

positives (Holder et al., 2015). When African American/Black women find themselves combating mental health challenges, the experiences can be debilitating and impact their decisions to leave the workplace before obtaining or no longer able to retain a leadership role along their career pathway (Nadal et al., 2014).

When expressing concerns about microaggressions, racism, oppression, and tokenism, African American/Black women are met with targeted retaliation. They are depicted as a problem employee, and no longer qualified for promotion into top-level leadership roles or no longer a good fit for their current positions in the organization (Page, 2018). Research on the leadership of women of color in the nonprofit sector shows African American/Black women are 61% more likely to work for White led organizations. They also report their experiences with racial inequities have led to them leaving both voluntarily due to increased oppressive actions, or involuntarily due to the organization not accepting their role in creating an oppressive environment (Bui, 2019; Page, 2018). When they are not moving along the leadership pipeline, the organization is not held accountable for their contribution to these women's experiences. An understanding of how organizational leadership is designed to perpetuate the racist and oppressive experiences of African American/Black women can be found in the culture and practices of organizations that are historically favorable for White male leadership (Eagly & Karau, 2002).

Organizational Leadership

Organizational leadership is the practice of leadership in the context of an organization's norms, values, beliefs, and culture (Daft, 2016; Schein, 2010). The executive leader provides organizational leadership, as the person holding senior managerial authority in an organization (Cook & Glass, 2013). The executive leader sets the entire organization's direction as the top

strategist, visionary, and decision maker. They must be prepared to lead the organization in achieving its strategic plan, drive the advocacy and public relation agendas, be the primary spokesperson, connect with all the critical stakeholders, lead by example, and define the organizational culture (Bellman & Ryan, 2009; Heifetz & Linksy, 2002; Kouzes & Posner, 2012).

The traditional focus of leadership has been centered on mid-class White men, expanding to White women in the past few decades. Therefore, the perception of who is best prepared and qualified for career trajectory is biased toward those groups (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Parker, 2002). When an organization's culture is structured around norms and values that stem from the underlying assumptions that oppress African American/Black women through microaggressions, tokenization, and racist practices, it is almost impossible to expect they will experience leadership success (Parker, 2001; Schein, 2010). Studies have shown African American/Black women are less likely than White women or other women of color to feel the opportunities for growth and advancement in the nonprofit sector are equal or these opportunities go to the employees that most deserve them (Bui, 2019; McKinsey & Company, 2019). They end up cycling through mid-level leadership roles that are not positioned to make organizational decisions or representative of the increased population of African American/Black people in the workforce. The African American/Black woman may find her career trajectory preferences, which reflect social aspirations and represent individuals and communities that mirror her own race and culture, stifled by perceptions, and shaped by experiences of oppression and racial inequities in the workplace (Schuermann et al., 2014).

Research has shown diverse teams increase organizations' performance, particularly race and gender diversity (Mercer, 2020). Therefore, representation of African American/Black

women in nonprofit executive leadership roles is critical to a nonprofit sector growing in service to diverse communities nationally (Bolman & Deal, 2017; McKinsey & Company, 2019). Self-efficacy in making career choices to increase their representation in supporting diverse communities can lead African American/Black women to seek top-level leadership roles in nonprofit organizations, even those predominately structured around White leadership (Lent et al., 1994; McKinsey & Company, 2020). Those women who can obtain the coveted seat at the executive leadership table, where decisions that most impact the outcomes of an organization, could be viewed as an exception to organizational leadership rules. These rules have historically benefited White men, and more recently White women, while creating organizational cultures that are oppressive and perpetuate racist practices in suppressing the career trajectory of African American/Black women in the nonprofit sector (Mercer, 2020; Vasavada, 2014). Many African American/Black women who are fortunate to attain executive-level leadership opportunities in such organizations are confronted with bias and discrimination, which is presented in the form of double jeopardy, due to the intersections of gender and race, when they attempt to exercise their authority as leaders in the workplace (Parker, 2002; Wallace, 2019).

The Intersections of Gender and Race in Organizations

African American/Black women's experiences in holding leadership positions in predominately White organizations are not contained in isolated circles of race and gender constructs (Crenshaw, 1991). The constructs of race and gender intersect and impede their ability to exercise power and influence in their organizations as leaders. It is particularly challenging when these constructs are met with oppression through forms of microaggressions, tokenization, and racist practices other women do not experience in the organization (Page, 2018). Often the diversity and inclusion organizations claim they value in leadership roles is not represented, as

reflected in the career trajectory of African American/Black woman who enter the nonprofit workplace in a favorable position to impact change, yet, is discounted for addressing the inequities in that deflect from a diverse and inclusive organization (Delgaldo & Stefancic, 2012; Page, 2018). The trajectory of an African American/Black woman's career in attaining and retaining an executive leadership role in a nonprofit organization is constrained by historical and cultural aspects of organizational leadership that are perpetuated by experiences of oppression and racist activities in organizations (Bell & Nkomo, 2001; Page 2018).

Organizations are not prepared to acknowledge White-centered approaches to leadership are not steeped in organizational culture with espoused values that are intended to deal with problems using diverse strategies (Bolman & Deal, 2017; Daft, 2016). The top-level leaders do not recognize the voices of those with different perspectives, even when they are not actually different from those who are double bound by race and gender, such as the African American/Black woman (Dickens et al., 2019; Wallace, 2019). The White men in the organizations are reluctant to acknowledge racist structures are the problem, and White women throw a curve at the racist narrative by using their power and privilege to deflect the issue as sexism (P. Collins, 2000; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). The African American/Black woman leader finds herself disempowered through an "outsider within" experience that illuminates each construct independently, mainly when expectations are set comparatively to the organization's White women (P. Collins, 2000; Thomas, 2019). Compared with their colleagues of other races and ethnicities, African American/Black women have distinct, and more troubling, experiences at work that perpetuate the stereotype threat they often hinder the ability to push past the oppression and barriers to progress along the career trajectory toward top-level leadership (P. Collins, 2000; Steele, 2010).

The Leadership Career Pipeline

Studies have suggested women have benefitted from more significant opportunities to progress along the career trajectory toward top-level leadership, with increases in education and experience attainment, yet, continue to experience inequality in achieving the highest levels of leadership compared to men (Schock et al., 2019). With career development being a combination of personal, contextual, and cognitive factors that influence the goals set toward pursuing a career path, perceptions of career barriers are influential in determining interests in attaining leadership roles (Lent et al., 1994). African American/Black women experience significant workplace challenges that can affect their career decision-making process, even when they have already obtained the education and experience that qualifies them for top-level leadership roles (Byars-Winston & Rogers, 2019).

Efforts to diversify the workforce dates back to the 1960s, when the New Careers Initiative was designed to provide human service jobs to marginalized populations, including those in the African American/Black community (Dunning, 2018). Despite intentions to provide new career and job opportunities, the glass ceiling was perpetuated by further marginalizing them to low-level roles with limited opportunities to climb the career ladder. Sixty years later, the research identifies a concept of the "broken rung" as impacting the breakdown in the career pipeline (see Figure 3) for women seeking leadership positions, with the most profound implications reflecting on the lack of progress of African American/Black women (McKinsey & Company, 2020). The impact of a broken rung in the corporate business sector has vast similarities to the experiences of African American/Black women seeking top-level leadership in the nonprofit business sector.

Figure 3. Representation of Corporate Career Pipeline by Gender and Race

REPRESENTATION OF CORPORATE PIPELINE BY GENDER AND RACE — MEN ▪ WOMEN

% of employees by level at the start of 2020

	ENTRY LEVEL	MANAGER	SR. MANAGER / DIRECTOR	VP	SVP	C-SUITE
WHITE MEN	35%	44%	51%	57%	59%	66%
MEN OF COLOR	18%	18%	15%	13%	13%	12%
WHITE WOMEN	29%	26%	25%	24%	23%	19%
WOMEN OF COLOR	18%	12%	9%	6%	5%	3%
TOTAL WOMEN IN 2020	47%	38%	33%	29%	28%	21%
% CHANGE FROM 2015-2020	+5%	+3%	+5%	+4%	+18%	+22%
% POINT CHANGE FROM 2015-2020[4]	+2.1pp	+1.2pp	+1.5pp	+1.2pp	+4.1pp	+3.7pp

Note. Reprinted from "Women in the Workplace: Corporate America is at a Critical Crossroad,"

by McKinsey & Company, 2020 (https://wiw-

report.s3.amazonaws.com/Women_in_the_Workplace_2020.pdf).

When looking at women's leadership growth, there are many concerns African

American/Black women are promoted slower than any other group and consistently

underrepresented in senior leadership roles (McKinsey & Company, 2020). African

American/Black women across multiple sectors lack the advocacy and sponsorship White men

and women benefit from in considerations of advancement or access to new opportunities along

their career trajectory. McKinsey and Company (2020) also reflected many of their colleagues,

and even supervisors, do not either realize or accept African American/Black women are having

a hard time making strides along their career path. There is limited understanding or willingness

to engage with the evidence-based reality African American/Black women run into more

systemic barriers than women of other races. They also have less managerial support and experience more critical discrimination, microaggressions, oppression, and blatant racism (McKinsey & Company, 2020; Parker, 2002).

Summary

Chapter 2 provided a review of the literature to differentiate African American/Black women's experiences and the challenges that impact their ability to obtain and retain top-level leadership roles in the nonprofit business sector. Through a conceptual framework of the phenomenon of being categorized as the "problem" woman of colour in the workplace, these women face inequities of tokenism, microaggressions, and racist actions. Experiences that are not resolved through mid-level leadership positionality may give them a voice to express concerns. The organizational leadership structure is contextualized by an organization's norms, values, beliefs, and culture in which the executive leader holds senior managerial authority over the organization. As the African American/Black population is increasing in the United States, individuals being served by nonprofit organizations are increasingly more diversified with members of the African American/Black community; however, their representation in these organizations' executive leadership roles remains stagnant.

Chapter 2 also addressed the intersection of race and gender that presents a double bind for African American/Black women in experiencing the phenomenon that influences their decision to take steps in moving along a career trajectory toward top-level leadership. They find themselves stuck in mid-level leadership roles in organizations that do not have a culture or espoused values that support their self-efficacy in making career choices to lead a nonprofit. The leadership career pipeline presents a broken rung in steps toward top-level leadership when the experiences along the way are oppressive and racist in action. Chapter 3 will provide the

opportunity to use a transcendental phenomenological research method to engage with African American/Black women in nonprofit leadership, and explore how their lived experiences were influenced by the phenomenon of being a "problem" woman of colour in the workplace.

Chapter 3. Method

This qualitative phenomenological study was designed to understand the lived experiences that contribute to limitations of African American/Black women in leadership roles or seeking to progress along their career pipeline toward such roles. Lived experience is defined as an experience a person has encountered in a lifetime (Exkano, 2013). The purpose of the study was to explore the phenomenon of the "problem" women of colour in the nonprofit workplace as it intersects with critical race theory (CRT) and social cognitive career theory (SCCT).

The following questions guided the study:

Research Question 1: How have African American/Black women's lived experiences impacted their attainment and retention of executive-level leadership roles in the private business sector?

Research Question 2: What strategies, environments, and resources support African American/Black women in attaining and retaining executive leadership roles in the nonprofit business sector?

This chapter presents the study's research method, including the research design and rationale, the researcher's role, and methodology. The research design and rationale section expound on the phenomenology of the study, the theoretical framework, and research questions that guided the data collection and analysis. The section focused on the role of the researcher as one of the most critical components, because it provides a concise explanation of my role as an observer–participant in the study. It also addresses any professional and personal relationships with the participants, my positionality in the research contributing to bias and how it was managed, and ethical issues that were identified and addressed.

Research Methodology

To better understand the research questions, a qualitative phenomenological research design was used to explore participants' lived experiences regarding a specific phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). As a research design, phenomenology has been described as the opportunity to gain the essence of meaning or understanding of a phenomenon based on one's description of experiencing the phenomenon (Patton, 2015). This study drew exclusively from African American/Black women who were in or had been in mid- to high-level leadership roles in nonprofit organizations in the Pacific Northwest region of the United States. The participants shared their personal stories as primary data to support the understanding of how the intersection of race with gender impacts African American/Black women's ability in their attainment and retention in the highest levels of leadership in nonprofit organizations.

The specific qualitative methodology for this research design was transcendental phenomenology, which allowed for a more subjective approach to gathering data from participants based on the fullness of their lived experiences, including how they felt, what they thought, and what was perceived as their truth (Moustakas, 2011). Pioneers of transcendental phenomenology, such as Edmund Husserl, focused on the elements of intentionality and intuition to capture the inner consciousness of research subjects as it related to the experiences that defined their behaviors and responses toward life events. With transcendental phenomenology, participants share their stories in a transcendental or nonnaturalist manner that draws out the essence and spirit of their experiences without the researcher's bias, assumption, or preconceptions (Madison, 2009; Moustakas, 2011).

In further consideration of the researcher's role, it is vital to guard against their personal experiences, creating an unintentional impact on the data collection and analysis processes. The

transcendental phenomenological approach includes an element called *epoché*, which in Greek

means to refrain from judgment based on personal perceptions of everyday experiences

(Moustakas, 2011). During the data collection and analysis processes, the concept of epoché

forces the researcher to first check for their own biases based on personal experiences with or

perceptions of the phenomenon, then setting their intentions toward a focus solely on the

experiences as described by the participants. Intently listening to participants share their

interpretations of experiences with racism, discrimination, and bias through a self-differentiated

lens allows the stories to shape the results authentically. The next step in the process,

transcendental-phenomenological reduction, further separates the researcher's experiences from

the participants' experiences, by allowing them to add depth in meaning to their experiences that

can only be their own. The depth in meaning comes from sharing how the experiences made

them feel, think, behave, react, and perceive future experiences (Moustakas, 2011). The final

step in the process is imaginative variation, which allows the participant to differentiate their

experiences from the external environment and seek meaning through what others, such as their

supervisors, peers, subordinates, or clients, may have been experiencing. The researcher's role is

to shift toward gathering more objective information to add structural context to the essence of

the experiences to comprehensively understand the phenomenon through the participants' lens

(Moustakas, 2011).

Population

The population of participants in the research study was generalized to those with lived

experience as it directly related to the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Participants were

identified from my professional network through engagement in community of practice groups,

specifically for Black, indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) executive leaders in the Pacific

Northwest region of Washington state. Participants were required to have held a mid-to-high

level leadership role in a nonprofit organization or corporation for at least 2 years. They also

needed to identify with the race construct of African American/Black, and the female gender

construct. Outreach was limited to potential participants located throughout the Pacific

Northwest region of Washington state.

Sample

This study drew exclusively from a network of African American/Black women who the

researcher had direct knowledge of being engaged as mid- to executive-level leaders in the

nonprofit sector. Each participant had been involved in communities of practice specifically for

BIPOC nonprofit executive leaders in Washington state. A list of potential participants was used

from an email listserv provided by the Washington Nonprofits organization. They identified all

BIPOC nonprofit executive leaders to engage in a series of self-care and healing from tensions

stemming from racial, environmental, and political traumas that impacted communities of color

in 2020. Another list of potential participants was used from an email listserv provided by the

City of Seattle's Our Best Advisory Council that was formed to address systemic racial

inequities in the African American/Black communities. Both lists were disaggregated to identify

individuals who self-identified as African American/Black women.

Participant Selection

The process for obtaining participants for the study began once the researcher received

institutional review board (IRB) approval from Seattle University. To participate in the research

study, participants needed to meet the following inclusion criteria: (a) identify with the construct

of African American or Black, (b) identify with the gender construct of female, (c) fall between

the ages of 30 and 70, and (d) have worked in a mid- to high-level leadership position in a

nonprofit organization for a minimum of 2 years. The researcher sent an email containing a brief

explanation of the study, the IRB informed consent form, a demographic questionnaire to

determine if the potential participants met the study's inclusion criteria, and a calendar link of

available dates to schedule their interviews. Participants were interviewed using the video

conferencing platform Zoom. Videoconferencing allowed the researcher limited observations of

facial expressions and body language while engaging in a pseudo-in-person experience during

the interviews. The use of videoconferencing also provided the opportunity to record the

interview session for transcribing both verbal and nonverbal communication. Participants were

informed if they did not want to have their interviews recorded they would be removed from the

study. All participants agreed to the recordings. The use of a pseudonym was assigned to each

participant to preserve confidentiality.

Data Collection

In this research study, data collection occurred in four phases to gather thick, rich data for

comprehensive analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Phase 1 included collecting demographic data

to understand the impact of identity on each participant's lived experience with the phenomenon

(Hughes et al., 2016). The additional data collection was conducted in a series of two

semistructured interviews, lasting no longer than 90 minutes, which allowed participants to

provide information on their experience through a process of sharing the beginning, middle, and

end of their personal stories (Granot et al., 2012; Seidman, 2006). The Seidman (2006) approach

to qualitative interviewing includes implementing an interview protocol that identifies the

preestablished interview questions. The interview protocol also provides a script to guide the

process of engaging in open-ended dialogue that allows the participants to freely express their

lived experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Granot et al., 2012).

In Phase 1, participants shared their interest by responding to an email invitation with a link to the IRB informed consent form, completed the demographic questionnaire (see Appendix A) that identified if they met the inclusion criteria, and provided identity information for data analysis. In Phase 2, participants engaged in the first round of confidential open-ended semistructured interviews to share the essence of their lived experiences in context to the historical progression in their careers (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Moustakas, 2011; Seidman, 2006). The 60- to 90-minute interviews were conducted through virtual, individual meetings with eight African American/Black women who self-identified as having worked in a mid-to-executive level position in the nonprofit business sector. The open-ended questions (see Appendix B) were prewritten and designed carefully to have facilitate dialogue about how the participant's felt, thought about, and perceived their lived experience with inequities in opportunities of attaining and retaining leadership roles (Moustakas, 2011).

In Phase 3, follow-up questions provided the opportunity to have a discourse about the more in-depth, more detailed responses to the open-ended questions. The open-ended questions from Phase 2 were reconstructed to allow the participants to share more details about the strategies, environments, and resources that impacted their experiences (Moustakas, 2011; Seidman, 2006). In Phase 4, a follow-up interview session was offered to participants who wanted to expound on any of the questions or for the researcher needs clarification on any part of the interview (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The follow-up also provided an opportunity to ask about nonverbal gestures and body language that were not apparent through the virtual interview experience (Patton, 2015).

Data Analysis Plan

Data were comprised of descriptions of the women's direct experiences obtained from their responses to open-ended questions and dialogue (Mills & Gay, 2019). To protect each participant's confidentiality, they were allowed to choose pseudonyms.

Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis

Interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) provided a research framework that allowed the researcher to focus on how the specific phenomenon was experienced by a subset of individuals with a distinct perspective (Creswell & Poth, 2018). IPA was used in this research process to ensure the analysis was participant-centered, and structured to retain the depth of experience in interpreting the data (Smith, 2011). The IPA framework provided an intensive qualitative analysis of the data derived from in-depth, semistructured interviews. Participants discussed, made sense of, and reacted to their experience with the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Smith, 2011). The analysis process fully considered the subjective responses rather than attempting to develop objective recollections that deflect from the impact of their lived experience with the phenomenon. It was also important to note the researcher's positionality to the context of the research had an impact on their ability to reflect and analyze the participants' responses to the open-ended interview questions (Smith, 2011). Through the IPA process, researcher bias was mitigated, and validation of the data occurred through thematic coding and constant comparison (Yin, 2011).

Thematic Coding

Thematic coding is also referred to as thematic analysis, and was used in this study to identify themes in the transcribed text through an analysis of the interpretation of words and sentence structure (Yin, 2011). Data coding was conducted through an abductive or iterative

process of constant comparison, to identify themes from the data collected in each series of the

interview process and build the codes directly from each response. The steps to perform a

constant comparison analysis included the following:

1. Reading through the entire set of data.

2. Chunking the data into smaller meaningful parts.

3. Labeling each chunk with a descriptive title or a code.

4. Comparing each new chunk of data with previous codes, so similar chunks were

   labeled with the same code.

After all the data were coded, the codes were grouped by similarity, and a theme was identified

and documented based on each grouping.

Measures of Quality

In conducting a qualitative phenomenological study that included interviews with

individuals that possibly share lived experiences, the researcher's positionality and

trustworthiness must be considered (Mills & Gay, 2019).

Positionality

Characteristics the researcher shared with the participants included being African

American, a woman, and a current or past employee in the private sector seeking to obtain or

retain a top-level leadership role in an organization. Other characteristics shared with various

participants included education, socioeconomic status, and age. The researcher also shared many

of the experiences resulting from the study's phenomenon. As the researcher sought to gain

insight into the phenomenon without bias, it was important they be sensitive to the participants'

experiences and gain their trust to ensure they were willing to share detailed information that

would add value to the study (Maxwell, 2013). Having personal relationships with some of the

participants aided in quickly gaining their trust; however, those the researcher engaged with for the first time needed to know they could speak openly about their experiences with the phenomenon.

Trustworthiness

If time and resources had permitted, it would have been ideal to contract with a third-party consultant to evaluate the interview transcripts by conducting a thorough review of the codes and themes to alleviate researcher bias and ensure trustworthiness (Creswell & Poth, 2018). As it was not possible to engage a third-party consultant, a qualitative investigational approach was implemented to triangulate the data, which included sending the interview responses back to the participants for review and clarification. A qualitative investigational approach also ensured the interview design was developed to obtain thick, rich data that could be validated and used for generalization with other populations (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

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Controls for Bias

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The researcher needed to ethically gather the information necessary to answer the research questions (Maxwell, 2013). Managing one's bias requires balancing their beliefs, values, experiences, and perspectives of the world that may have initially led to the research being conducted (Patton, 2015). Remaining objective and self-differentiating one's own experiences from those of the participants is the researcher's responsibility. When the researcher bias is explicit to the research, transparency is the best approach to ensuring participants are aware of the direct connection to the phenomenon being addressed (Maxwell, 2013; Patton, 2015). It is also essential during the interview process the researcher is aware of both their verbal and nonverbal communication that may impact the participants' responses (Maxwell, 2013).

Summary

In this chapter, the researcher identified the methods of a qualitative phenomenological study designed to understand the lived experiences that contribute to limitations of African American/Black women in leadership roles or seeking to progress along their career pipeline toward such roles. The specific qualitative methodology for this research was transcendental phenomenology, which allowed the researcher to capture the essence of the participants' lived experiences, including how they felt, what they thought, and what was perceived as their truth, in the data collection and analysis process. The participants were identified from a professional network specifically for BIPOC executive leaders in the Pacific Northwest region of Washington state. They were required to have held a mid- to high-level leadership role in a nonprofit organization or corporation for at least 2 years, and identify with the race construct of African American/Black and the female gender construct. Participants were invited to engage virtually in two rounds of semistructured interviews using the video conferencing platform Zoom. The Seidman (2006) approach to qualitative interviewing was implemented through an interview protocol that identified the preestablished interview questions and a script to guide the process of engaging in open-ended dialogue that allowed the participants to freely express their lived experiences. The data analysis was conducted using an IPA process that ensured researcher bias was mitigated, and validation of the data occurred through the implementation of thematic coding and constant comparison.

Chapter 4 presents comprehensive findings from semistructured interviews with the eight participants. The research questions were used to guide the analysis of the participants' responses to open-ended questions and their lived experiences are shared thematically to inform the discussion in Chapter 5.

Chapter 4. Findings

The purpose of this study was to examine the lived experiences of African American/Black women seeking to attain and retain executive-level leadership positions in the nonprofit sector. The first three chapters of this dissertation offered an introduction to the problem surrounding leadership capacity and development. A review of the literature outlined the conceptual and theoretical frameworks that shaped the study's direction to differentiate African American/Black women's experiences, and the challenges that impact their career trajectory toward top-level leadership roles. Chapter 3 described the rationale of a transcendental phenomenological qualitative study, sampling procedures, instrumentation, and the methodology for data collection and analysis. Chapter 4 presents the findings that emerged from the data collected, and analyzed using the conceptual framework constructed for this study.

A transcendental phenomenological research design was used to provide a more subjective approach to gathering data from participants based on the fullness of their lived experiences, which included how they felt, what they thought, and what they perceived as their truth (Moustakas, 2011). Transcendental phenomenology focused the research on elements of intentionality and intuition to capture the inner consciousness of the research participant as it related to the experiences that defined their behaviors and responses toward workplace experiences. Participants shared their stories in a transcendental or nonnaturalist manner that drew out the essence and spirit of their experiences without the researcher's bias, assumption, or preconceptions (Madison, 2009; Moustakas, 2011).

This chapter presents comprehensive findings from semistructured interviews with eight African American/Black women executive leaders from the Pacific Northwest region of Washington state. A qualitative phenomenological approach was used to understand how the

participant's experiences related to the disproportionate number of African American/Black women in mid- to senior-level leadership roles. The approach also illuminated how the lack of equitable opportunities in the workplace prohibited the participants from advancing to executive leadership roles. The participants' lived experiences were intended to inform the nonprofit workforce and give aspiring African American/Black women executive leaders insight into perceptions and strategies to consider when attaining and retaining the position. Each participant was given a pseudonym to protect her identity. Additionally, any information obtained by the researcher that may have compromised the participant's identity has been intentionally excluded from this dissertation.

All findings presented served to answer the following research questions for this study:

Research Question 1: How have African American/Black women's lived experiences impacted their attainment and retention of executive-level leadership roles in the nonprofit business sector?

Research Question 2: What strategies, environments, and resources support African American/Black women in attaining and retaining executive leadership roles in the nonprofit business sector?

Summary of the Research Design

This qualitative phenomenological study was designed to understand the lived experiences that contribute to limitations of African American/Black women in leadership roles or seeking to progress along their career pipeline toward such positions. The study was intended to explore the lived experiences of African American/Black women leaders in the nonprofit business sector in the Pacific Northwest. The research design was selected to examine further the

phenomenon of the "problem" women of colour in the nonprofit workplace as it intersects with

critical race theory (CRT) and social cognitive career theory (SCCT).

Qualitative data were collected, analyzed, and integrated into this research study to

provide the researcher with a deeper understanding of how their experiences are related to

African American/Black women being disproportionately represented in the mid- to senior-level

leadership roles. The study reflected the lack of equitable opportunities in the workplace

prohibiting them from advancing to executive leadership roles. A transcendental

phenomenological approach allowed for a more subjective approach to gathering data from

participants based on the essence of their lived experiences (Moustakas, 2011).

Data Collection Process

Data were drawn exclusively from a network of African American/Black women the

researcher had direct knowledge of being employed as mid- to executive-level leaders in the

nonprofit sector. Each participant has been involved in communities of practice specifically for

BIPOC nonprofit executive leaders in Washington state. Participants were identified from email

listservs provided by the Washington Nonprofits organization and the City of Seattle's Our Best

Advisory Council. Both lists were disaggregated to identify the researched individuals identified

as African American/Black women from direct contact in workgroups. The researcher

determined eight was the maximum number of participants interviewed using the 2-step

interview process in the timeframe allowed for completing the dissertation.

An email containing a brief explanation of the study, the IRB informed consent form, a

demographic questionnaire to determine alignment with the study's inclusion criteria, and a

calendar link of available dates to schedule their interviews was sent to potential participants.

The demographic survey contained suggestive questions to determine if potential participants

met the inclusion criteria of (a) identify with the construct of African American or Black, (b)

identify with the gender construct of female, (c) fall between the ages of 30 and 70, and (d) have

worked in a mid- to high-level leadership position in a nonprofit organization for a minimum of

2 years. The snowball sampling process was organically used by the individuals who received

the original email, as several recipients forwarded it to African American/Black women in their

networks they believed met the criteria (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Mills & Gay, 2019).

Data Collection Instruments

Several instruments were used in the data collection process. Demographic data were

collected using a Qualtrics online survey. Semistructured interviews were conducted with each

African American/Black woman leader using an established interview protocol to collect data

based on open-ended research questions. The researcher also conducted a thematic analysis of

responses from the open-ended questions to identify themes in the transcribed text by analyzing

the interpretation of words and sentence structure. Because the interviews were conducted in two

separate rounds of interviews, themes were identified through an abductive or iterative process of

constant comparison of the data collected in each interview process. An IPA approach ensured

the researcher fully considered the subjectiveness in the participant's responses rather than

attempting to develop objective recollections that detract from the impact of their lived

experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

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Study Setting and Participants

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This section presents background information on the study setting and participants of the

study.

Study Setting

This case study was conducted in Washington state, in the Pacific Northwest region of the United States. The invitational email containing the demographic questionnaire was sent to the eight potential participants identified by the researcher as possibly meeting the inclusion criteria. The demographic survey determined only six of the potential participants met the inclusion criteria. Four additional individuals completed the demographic questionnaire, and two met the inclusion criteria through the snowball sampling process. Eight African America/Black women in leadership roles were interviewed. Each round of interviews ranged from 45–90 minutes, and was conducted virtually using the Zoom video and audio-conferencing platform. All interviews were recording and individual responses to the questions were transcribed and later coded. During the coding process, the researcher identified commonalities and themes of lived experiences from each African American/Black woman leader participating in the study.

Participant Profiles

Table 1 gives an overview of the eight African American/Black women in this study. Each participant selected her pseudonym based on a fictitious name that could reflect her overall interview and lived experiences as a nonprofit leader. This name is used as a pseudonym for this dissertation only. All participants met the criteria of identifying racially as African American/Black and gender as women. They all had mid- to top-level experience as leaders in the private sector, with roles that included supervisor, manager, director, chief, or president for a minimum of 2 years. Two of the eight leaders had a doctoral degree, and one was pursuing her doctoral degree. Although the leaders participating in the study represented varied organizational types, including corporations, governments, universities, K–12 public schools, and medical

centers, they all had direct leadership experience in nonprofit organizations. Each leader also had

experience working in organizations outside of Washington state.

Table 1. Participant Profiles

Pseudonym	Age Range	Highest Education Level	Years as Leader	Years to Executive Leadership	Highest Leadership Level
Denise L.	30–39	Master's	5–10	13	Executive director
April B.	60–69	Bachelor's	21–25	N/A	Director
Candace J.	50–59	Doctorate	26–30	3	Executive director
Megan M.	40–49	Bachelor's	5–10	15	Chief executive officer
Denise G.	40–49	Master's	15–20	12	Associate executive director
Elise W.	50–59	Master's	21–25	7	Executive director
Mary Alice B.	50–59	Bachelor's	21–25	10	Associate executive director
Louise M.	60–69	Doctorate	21–25	20	Chief executive officer

Findings

Through their voices, the eight African American/Black women who participated in this

study yielded findings significant to the current literature on the difficulties in attaining and

retaining top-level leadership roles in the private business sector. Each gave their time to answer

open-ended questions in two separate interview sessions through the virtual meeting platform of

Zoom.

The Essence of the Participants' Experiences

During these sessions, several women expressed the exhaustion of recounting

experiences that left them no longer wanting to hold executive-level titles in the private sector,

particularly in nonprofit organizations. While those still leading nonprofit organizations shared

mixed feelings of fulfillment in serving a mission-driven purpose in the community, they wanted

to see more women who look like them have better experiences in executive roles. All

participants described being executive-level leaders included having the responsibility of running

the entire organization strategically, systemically, and fiscally, while managing staff, a board of

directors, and external relationships. The range of questions asked prompted the women to share challenging situations and strategies to overcome them. Participants gave diverse responses as they described personal circumstances and obstacles, and they provided answers to obstacles that involved needing to work harder than their White peers to demonstrate the same results. They faced inequities with boards that were not adequately prepared to support a Black woman leader. They also experienced competitive discord among other leaders of color in the organization. Strategies used in these situations were not always consistent but demonstrated a pattern of endurance, motivation, and perseverance. These women used prior professional experience, personal networks, self-selected support systems, and well-grounded educational attainment to attain and retain their leadership positions. Detailed findings collected from participants related to each of the research questions that guided the interviews is now presented.

Research Question 1: Career History

Research Question 1 for this study was: What are the lived experiences of African American/Black women in executive-level leadership roles in the nonprofit business sector? Based on responses to the open-ended questions during the first round of interviews, the following themes were identified as aligning with Research Question 1: (a) adequately prepared while on the job, (b) opportunities to prepare outside of the workplace, (c) observing the experiences of other African American/Black women, and (d) the path leading out the door.

Adequately Prepared While on the Job

The eight African American/Black women who participated in this study shared executives need to run the entire organization while strategizing, building systems, working with the board, managing the finances, fundraising, leading staff teams, and relationship building. Each participant identified the positions along their career trajectory that prepared them to step

into executive-level leadership roles. All participants described holding positions such as manager, supervisor, and director, which qualified them to manage staff and volunteers, work with board members, fundraise, and develop their leadership skills. As a school principal in the K–12 education sector, Candace J. learned how to set up and align with systems that impacted children. In her roles as development director and community relations manager, Denise L. gained a broad perspective on all aspects of the organization that helped her believe she could eventually run an organization as the top-level leader. Elise W. held director-level roles that allowed for interaction with senior leaders and board members, and the opportunity to work with funders and learn how philanthropy supports organizations. Megan M. had corporate-level jobs that strengthened her understanding of meeting strategic goals, market services, and creating networks that benefit the organization.

Several participants also had leaders, mentors, or observers of their work who saw potential in their leadership skills and identified opportunities for growth into higher roles. For example, Mary Alice B stated, "I think, for me, that is how my path to an executive director kind of came to me. It was always someone else, and interesting enough, it was always women." Another participant, Candace J., also noted:

I can't say there hasn't been any position that I've had that hasn't influenced me in some way or another to be at an executive level because I would take something from those roles to be better at what I do.

Denise L. shared a similar statement:

I do feel like at every turn, every time I took a job and started to like find my way at that job, I did start to think about "Well, what are the skills I need to gather for the next step of what I might want to do."

Overall, each participant had the opportunity to gain essential skills to lead at the executive level in a nonprofit organization. All participants also identified preparation opportunities outside of the workplace along their career trajectory.

Opportunities to Prepare Outside of the Workplace

The eight African American/Black women who participated in this study described experiences outside of the workplace that provided additional skills and connections in preparation for becoming executive-level leaders. Many of the women enrolled in leadership development classes or programs. April B. and Denise G. took nonprofit leadership courses as undergraduates in college, while Megan M. and Mary Alice B. participated in professional development leadership programs offered through their workplaces. Elise W. even participated in the Future Leaders of America program offered through her high school. Several volunteered with community boards or identified mentors in the community to provide insights into their desired roles. Two of the eight women built leadership skills in competitive sports or athletics. In comparison, two others were actively engaged in Black sororities that provided aspiration and shaped their perspective on leading organizations. For example, Megan M. shared:

> When I pledged to a sorority because it's not just any sorority, you know a Black
> sorority, that also helps you build your character as a Black woman to really go out into
> the world and be successful as well.

Each of the participants benefitted from the experiences they selected outside of the workplace to prepare their pathway toward executive-level leadership. The opportunity to observe other African American/Black women in leadership roles played a significant role in the career trajectory of all participants in this study.

Observing the Experiences of Other African American/Black Women Leaders

When the eight participants were informed in the United States less than 1% of executive-level positions in the private business sector are held by African American/Black women, the researcher was surprised to hear the majority directly state the word "racism" as the culprit. For example, Candace J. noted:

When you know that you're qualified and you're even more qualified than someone they hired. It makes you wonder why didn't they select me? But I think it's historically women of color and people of color, who have not had access to education and finances that provide an opportunity for those roles. . . . You think because even though it's 2021, you have to start back from the historical aspect because if historically that had been different, where we had access, then in 2021 it would look very, very different. I still think we are under the guise of racism, so those opportunities still are not fair for people of color. . . . And so, like we have a vice president, Kamala Harris. So, it's like, "oh wow, Black people are making it!" No. Women of color are still in the same positions.

Another participant, April B., shared a similar reflection:

They can accept White people being the savior, but not people of color helping their people. . . . It was like everybody wants that, but when we started talking about, you look at nonprofit organizations, especially those that are headed by White women, I want to call out White women in this not because I got issues with them, I just don't trust them. The majority of them don't even realize their own racism in their attempt to be liberal and progressive.

Along the same lines, Denise L. described sexism as a barrier:

I think it's the inability to see people for who they are and what they bring to the table—

thinking that it needs to look one way and come in a very specific package. I also think

that the Black women experience is sort of like a unique sexism in that it's very much

layered about our blackness in addition to our womanhood. And I also think that there is

sort of a barrier that prevents Black women from getting the coaching, sponsorship,

mentorship, etc., that really allows people to see them as next-level leaders.

Lousia M. described the intersection of racism and sexism as creating barriers for Black

women in attaining and retaining top-level leadership roles, stating: "Racism. And, combined

with sexism, and so Black women get the double whammy of not being not being valued, not

even being seen." She also shared a perspective of White supremacy as a barrier, with the

following statement:

All of the bias and the stereotypes that the White supremacy has put upon us, or just

magnified when it comes to Black women trying to get ahead in particular areas. And you

know this really is where you have to be twice as good to look just as good. And still

oftentimes we don't get recognized for the work that we've always been doing. So, it's

still the good old boys club around in a lot of not only just private sector, but public

sector and nonprofit sector. And I've seen people go into an organization pretty naïve,

thinking, "oh yeah, well, I got this job, and I'm just going to be really, I'm going to be

supported." And "they hired me, so they must want me here." And then you get there,

and you're set up to fail. They were set up to fail from the beginning because the support

wasn't there. They didn't know who to try to build relationships with. There were

systems in place that were not going to allow them to be successful.

Megan M. shared a similar perspective:

I think we think that we have to work so hard and give so much because we think that we have to have every single qualification answered before we even apply. Even when we do apply, it is a White male-dominated world. Those are the folks that lead and the folks that make decisions. I don't know that there is anyone on this planet that a White male is more intimidated by than a Black woman. I also think that as the pay gap, racism, and all of those things increase, we have the gender issue, we have the race issue, and we have all of those things stacked up. I say, for us, most of the world sees things stacked against us. That also causes us to just be put on the back burner for any and everything, especially in positions of power and leadership. On the flip side, when we do get there, we are amazing. We change things for the better. We make room for other people. So, while it takes us longer than most to get there and there's not enough of us there when we do get there, we open the doors for a lot of other women, Black women, women of color, and people that look like us for sure.

A few participants made it clear education should not be a barrier to attaining executive-level leadership roles, for example, Elise W. said:

And when you start thinking about all things being equal, with the African American women who have college degrees or advanced degrees, that number [of executives] is very small. It shouldn't be if you think about the number of women who actually graduate with master's degrees and PhDs. So, I think there's a social construct that's the issue.

Another example was Denise G.'s statement: "The issue is not there's not enough educated qualified Black woman, because Black women are the most educated people in this country."

The eight participants stated their experience was directly impacted by the low percentage of African American/Black women in executive-level roles. Four of the participants described experiences of not being chosen to succeed White leaders. The participants explained that boards had not experienced working with African American/Black woman leaders in the organization and were not ready to ensure their success. For example, Denise G. stated:

> Even though my scores are higher for the interview, but it was just some of the people weren't ready for Black women. I think that people still have a schema in regards to what they believe intellect looks like or even sounds like. Their background experiences are limited, with the intellect and the drive of being around Black Women leaders. They don't want you too strong. I, in other respects, I've seen White women strong, and they're able to push forward, but if we're strong, we're too strong.

Three participants described experiences where boards, led predominately by White men, expressed interest in hiring diverse candidates. The competitive hiring process landed them as runner up to White candidates or other candidates of color. For example, Denise G. shared an experience of not being selected over a less qualified Asian man, recalling:

> Even though my scores are higher for the interview, but it was just some of the people weren't ready for Black women. I think that people still have a schema in regards to what they believe intellect looks like or even sounds like. Their background experiences are limited, with the intellect and the drive of being around Black women leaders. They don't want you too strong. I, in other respects, I've seen White women strong, and they're able to push forward, but if we're strong, we're too strong.

Elise W. shared how the board consistently selected White candidates, providing:

I think that there's a sense of superiority with the board. I think the board sees themselves superior to their executive directors. . . . When it's a demanding role anyway, and when you have people such as your board that's not truly behind you, I think it's stressful . . . I remember the White people who were chosen as executive directors, that didn't have the same experience that I had.

Louisa M. also described the challenges of competitive hiring processes, stating:

And even though I say play the game, White folks change the game on you. And they decide they want to have something different, and you're thinking, "what's the game?" They're not gonna tell you the rules. You gotta figure it out. They change the game. Yeah, I thought I knew what I was going into, and they didn't just changed the rules; they changed the game.

As participants described the barriers making it difficult to attain executive-level leadership roles, those who had achieved the goal shared mixed experiences impacting their ability to retain the positions. Several participants had experiences that led to them either never attaining a top-level leadership position or exiting the organization without returning to a similar role.

The Path Leading Out the Door

Four of the eight African American/Black women who participated in this study had distinct experiences leading to them no longer being in top-level leadership roles. Three of the women had experiences while in mid-level leadership roles that impacted their decisions to pursue or ability to attain top-level leadership roles. For example, Mary Alice B. shared:

Most of the time, you would feel like people who have kind groomed you to be in those kinds of positions would be excited about the work that you've done and the work that

they supported you on to move to the next level. That wasn't so. For some reason, this

CEO kind of felt like I was her work of art, and she was going to do everything that she

could do to have me just be there for whatever her motivations or reasoning was. It was

just really odd in that she created this *work of art* [emphasis added], and if anyone was

going to move me up the ladder, it was going to be her.

The eight participants described their entry into the organization as good, supportive

work environments, with opportunities to develop their leadership skills. Most of the women felt

valued and had individuals guiding their success. Denise L. stated, "The CEO at the time is

somebody who took a personal interest in me and really sponsored me for things like a

leadership development program."

Most of the participants identified the shift from a positive work environment when they

experienced marginalization, microaggressions, and distrust. As they called out inequities to top-

level leaders or board members that were not resolved, they realized the organization or the role

was not a good fit. For example, Louisa M. stated, "So there was a lot of support, but at the same

time there were some other leaders in the organization that was just flat out racist, and he didn't

do enough to mitigate the harm that they were causing." Denise L. described a similar

experience, sharing:

I think that divestment was really to say, "Okay, I feel like I am being marginalized here.

I feel like either what I'm bringing to the organization in terms of leadership or results is

not being valued because there's not even consistent investment in this area, much less

growth." I think that definitely shaped my view about whether or not it was time to move

on.

The eight participants in this research study were able to share their lived experiences with gaining the skills and putting forth an effort to become executive-level leaders. Even though each of the participants experienced barriers, during the second round of interviews, they identified the strategies, environments, and resources essential to achieving their career goals.

Research Question 2: Details of Experience

Research Question 2 of this study was: What strategies, environments, and resources support African American/Black women in attaining and retaining executive leadership roles in the nonprofit business sector? Based on responses to the open-ended questions during the second round of interviews, the following themes were identified as aligning with Research Question 2: (a) characteristics of an executive-level leader, (b) overcoming obstacles, (c) working twice as hard, and (d) aligning with the organizational culture.

Characteristics of an Executive-Level Leader

The eight African American/Black women who participated in this study had unique personal characteristics that contributed to their career development, including being organized thinkers, using a servant leadership approach, having a growth mindset, and being a strong team leader. Five subthemes emerged from the interviews that reflected common characteristics most participants held: emotional intelligence, discerning people, knowledgeable, strong communicator, and supportive relationships.

Emotional Intelligence. The eight participants identified the need to display emotional balance or stability in the workplace through their self-awareness and relatability with others. Four of the participants described the ability to manage their emotions, and being aware of body language and tone while leading others. For example, Louisa M. shared, "I have high emotional intelligence confirmed by the actual emotional intelligence assessment test, which I kind of knew

that I did. So I'm very self-aware."

April B. stated:

> When I think of soft skills, I think again being authentic. I think that would be honest.
> Being able to read a room. And if I work with you for a year, I should be able to tell by
> your body language or your facial expressions if you're happy, sad, or frustrated, or
> scared.

Megan M. also shared:

> For the last 2 years or so, when I started this role, I thought, anyway, nobody else, that I
> had to show up in spaces to make them comfortable. And so that often that may be that I
> change my tone or talked a little less or talks a little differently. Then, but still remain on
> and upbeat and happy, which drains you.

Denise L. confirmed the sentiment, stating:

> I don't experience very high highs or low lows, and it allows me to kind of make
> decisions clearly and rationally and to not take it personally when things don't go well.
> And to continue to push forward. So, I think that I've been able to separate feelings of
> stress, feelings of being overwhelmed from having to encounter a problem and trying to
> solve it.

Discerning of People. Five of the participants identified the ability to discern the
characteristics of others to build trust and determine the best approaches for engaging with them
as a leader. Three of the participants described how setting personal boundaries with people
created the space for building relationships and working collectively. For example, Denise L.
stated:

I do think that I like to see the best possible qualities and other people. And so, I think that that gives me a certain discernment when making decisions about hiring, about coaching, about who I can trust. And I think that's a really important quality to have in any sort of a leadership role. I think also I like to judge people fairly. So even if we have sort of personality conflicts, I can separate that from the work you do and how well you do it and then try to address or adjust on the back end to the ways that maybe our personalities don't match very well. But I still feel like we can move forward from a business and work perspective. So, I've definitely had staff over the years, who you know, if we had known each other just socially, we probably wouldn't know each other at all, but that I still were able to coach and get the best out of them and work well with them. In a way, that you know they were appreciative of the fact that I could separate personality conflicts from their overall professional development and ability to thrive in an organization.

Elise W. shared:

I was used to coming into a room and, or I was comfortable, coming into a room and then identifying, listening, and hearing. I don't know if I would say reading a room. But connecting with people in a way that I could find some type of common denominator and be able to relate to that person. And so, as an executive director, oftentimes, you know you're in one-on-one meetings—your meeting strangers. You're following up with people that you meet just real briefly but eventually, what you're doing is you're cultivating that relationship so that that person will be an investor or a donor to your organization. And so I think that ability to relate to, my again, interpersonal skills.

Mary Alice B. also shared:

I think that really taught me how to really kind of move and engage people and get buy-in from people. And I had gotten buy-in from people that when I first started that position people warned me about. You know, they say, "this people, that people, those people, they're never going to buy in." And those were my first people who bought in. Because I always figure that if you can get the naysayers to get on your team, there's nobody; I mean, there ain't nobody, you can't get on your team. So, I think I feel like I got that attribute, and it strengthens my relationship building with people as well. In particular, I mean, there was a lot of different characters. And I don't want to say characters in a mean way. They just all had different personalities. So, I think where I got that relationship building and really kind of leading just to meet people where they're at.

Knowledgeable. Each of the eight participants discussed the need to know the work and have expertise in their roles as leaders. A few participants described being accountable for knowing all organization functions, yet ensuring they had a team with expertise in their deficit areas. For example, Megan M. stated:

I think the last part which I also had to learn on the job is the financial awareness and acumen that it takes to be a CEO—just understanding of finances of an organization, which is still a learning process every single day. But again, you know I make sure that I have brilliant people around me to make sure that we're making good decisions. But it's important for me to also know the finances of the organization and understanding how we work, how we operate, and where we're spending our money.

Mary Alice B. shared a similar experience, offering:

You have to know a lot about everything. Well, you have to know a little bit about
everything, because you have your staff who you hire to be your experts, but you still
have to know a little bit about everything for sure.

All eight participants had various ways to build their knowledge and skills, including
reading business books, working with executive coaches, and accessing professional
development courses. For example, Candace J. stated:

So, the research, the learning, the book smarts enhanced and benefited me. The
experience is irreplaceable, so now the practice, so I have a theory and the practice the
day-to-day on the job. . . . And knowing that I had the capacity and intelligence, and the
skill and expertise to progress toward a directorship and executive director in a role.

Megan M. shared a more extensive experience with coaching and professional
development opportunities, recalling:

I will say that organization does a good job of continuing education and always finding
opportunities to help develop, continuously develop us. Be it finance, in giving us a
financial coach to make sure that we understand the financials of the organization. Or
giving us a crisis management coach, so we know when to respond and when not to when
crisis happens and how to respond. . . . Difficult conversation coaching and things like
that. And there's always things outside of that as well that our partners and sponsors often
offer. For example, one partner allowed me to go spend time at Georgetown and do a
certification in an executive leadership program for nonprofit leaders. So I tried to take
advantage of those as well. To make sure that I'm always learning, be it a certification
class or online learning. LinkedIn learning what have you. Just always making sure
you're sharpening the sword.

A few women described their level of knowledge as undermined and devalued compared to their White counterparts. For example, Mary Alice B. stated:

Being a person of color, everything we do is questioned, right. You can be in the room, and you could be the only person of color. There could be two of you, and you're having discussions about things, and you could come up with this idea or the suggestion. They don't hear you. And then some White person will say something, everybody's getting on board, and they're like "oh that's great let's move forward." And you're sitting there, and you're like, "I just said that."

Strong Communicator. The eight African American/Black women had common perspectives on the need to have communication skills to ensure their success as top-level leaders. Each participant described tenets of effective and active communication that included listening, processing, and responding to others. For many of the participants, the ability to communicate effectively also required a sense of confidence and authenticity that was harder to maintain being African American/Black. For example, Mary Alice B. shared:

I would have to say, to be at that level, you have to have confidence. The ability to listen. The ability to process. The ability to multitask. I think that you have to have passion for the work because it requires a lot of work. And when I say these, I'm speaking to attributes that I have.

Several participants also expressed the need to be well-rounded in using written, verbal, and nonverbal communication to lead their organizations. Elise W. stated, "The personal characteristics I would say were probably my interpersonal skills and my communication skills. And then the ability to communicate would be just really in written form, verbal communication, nonverbal communication."

Megan M. also shared her experience with verbal and nonverbal communication, providing:

And be comfortable with both receiving hard stuff and dishing it outright. Having real conversations, honest conversations. So you know, being able to think critically, but also deliver critical information in a way that is digestible both internally and externally. . . . I didn't always have to be the loudest one in the room; I don't, I still don't. I don't always have to be the one that gets all the attention. Because in those quiet moments, you get to read the room. You get to understand what's going on and then respond accordingly. So being willing to follow and to listen and to learn, and you know, taking all that into you can . . . You have to, you know because of that, you know I'm perceived as quiet, but you know I use it to my advantage.

Supportive Relationships. The eight African American/Black women who participated in the research study identified various vital relationships essential to their ascension to executive-level positions. Six participants shared how the professional relationships that supported their growth were White men and women. For example, Megan M. stated, "I will also say in a corporate environment, most of my favorite managers and bosses and leaders and coaches and mentors were older White men. And maybe because it was corporate America. And it is you know their world."

Two of the participants were fortunate to have the opportunity to be in the presence of successful African American/Black leaders. For example, Elise W. shared:

I think there were a number of baby boomers who were looking into the future of perspective leaders or future leaders in the nonprofit sector. And so the people that I found most supportive are, are very strong White women. And I say strong because these

are women who really have, who really don't care what other people think. And the women that I'm referring to, if I just had to give you a year, I would say they were born between 1949 and 1951 or something along that line. So, they're much older than I am, but also the reason I share that timeframe is that they came into their own after going to graduate school and very much breaking the glass ceiling, if you will, in the human services arena. And probably at a time before people really focused on the racial inequities in the human services industry or sector.

Two participants also shared experiences with family and close friends who were instrumental in their professional development. Candace J. shared, "So mother, grandparents, and close friends have been the main relationships that have really spurred me on in this career trajectory." Lousia M. also expressed her experience, offering:

Well, because I had role models, it wasn't as if I didn't see in other people when I wanted to become a CEO, so I think I was fortunate in that in that way. I think I mentioned the phrase "you can't be what you can't see," so I was really fortunate in that I had these other Black women who had attained positions of power and influence in their chosen careers. And so I had them to look at to say yep, I want to be like that. And, and so I, I think that may be somewhat atypical that I had that circle of friends that allowed me to not have any doubt that what I wanted was achievable.

Two of the participants even described the need to maintain supportive relationships even when they did not know what the future held in their career trajectory. April B stated:

The people that you meet on your way up are the people you see on your way down. More importantly, when someone speaks your name, how do you want them to feel about you? How do you want your name to reflect on you?

Megan M. shared:

> There are amazing women that I get to lean on and take examples from. That makes it a
> little bit easier for me, you know. People have paved the way, so why do I have to
> reinvent the wheel and struggle when . . . And I think that's the beauty about sisterhood
> and women that are doing this work and taking these mantels. They are making sure that
> other women, and so that is also my responsibility, are lifted up, supported, and able to
> learn from their journey.

The leadership characteristics described by the eight participants should have
strengthened their chances of attaining and retaining executive-level positions; yet, they each
expressed a variety of obstacles blocking their successful career trajectory.

Overcoming Obstacles

The eight African American/Black women interviewed for this research shared
experiences with racism, imposter syndrome, and White supremacy as the main barriers in their
career progression. The experiences were at various levels in their careers, starting from their
ascension out of mid-level roles to their departure from top-level positions. The overarching
experience was described as exhausting and challenged each woman in various ways to consider
the cost of leading organizations. Three of the eight women never achieved the goal of becoming
top-level executive leaders. April B. described the following experiences that blocked her growth
trajectory, providing:

> I think that one of the things I've noticed in a lot of the nonprofit organizations is that
> many of them are headed by White women. Meaning well, but all the people who are
> doing the work on the ground typically are people of color. Then those like myself who
> are in management positions or assistant director positions, the expectation, the bar is set

so high that is almost incomprehensible. You know, so just again, that's the other tip where the White supremacy comes in. No one knows better. You didn't articulate it in the high academic arena, you know, the way I am a custom to. This doesn't sound like it came from the ivory tower. Where is your data that that supports that statement? You know how? Do you have statistics? How do you know it's going to work? Well, that's great, but that's just anecdotal. No, that's lived experience. That's not anecdotal; that's lived experience. Yes, but we can't measure it so. If it's not quantified, if it hasn't been analyzed, then it's not true. You know what I mean? So, when you start thinking about how that supremacy culture plays out in the workplace, people of color are never going to make it to the top-level until they can start quantifying the data in the work that they're doing and giving something that supports that fact.

Candace J. described a similar experience, stating: "I think the one obstacle is feeling that imposter syndrome or having to feel that I have to prove who I am and that I have to work harder to be excellent at what I do versus being mediocre."

Four of the participants left executive-level positions in nonprofit organizations, with the possibility of never returning. For example, Elise W. shared:

So, what I learned after being an executive director was something I've always known. I don't like a lot of bosses, you know. I like to know who my point person is, and that's what I report to. I did contract work. I obtained my business license and really enjoyed consulting and contracting. Coming into the room and being that facilitator and hearing what people want to do and help them get it done. I think, for me when you hire someone as a contractor to do that, you're paying them for a task. When I served as an executive director, I felt like I had to be a lot of things to a lot of different people.

The researcher asked Louisa M. if she would reconsider returning to a nonprofit executive leadership role, with the knowledge that many White executives are currently retiring and boards are looking for diverse candidates. She stated:

> No, I've had several already in the last 3.5 years. And I can, I can say no because I'm just
>
> done with that. There's nothing about being a nonprofit leader right now that is attractive
>
> to me.

The other two participants were still working diligently to retain their executive-level role successfully. For example, Megan M. shared:

> I think the hesitation was often my own doubt: self-doubt and worry and anxiety. And
>
> you know, if I should, if I could. You know, will I make it. Will I fail? And then,
>
> especially now, you know I have my own hesitation all the time because now I'm
>
> responsible for 70 plus people being able to feed their families. So, I'm, so you know I
>
> often try to calculate risk and response to certain environments to make sure that I don't
>
> do anything to jeopardize their livelihood right.

Several participants described the lack of African American/Black women as role models in executive-level positions as barriers in their career trajectory. Not seeing women that looked like them or having African American/Black women pave the way in the organizations they were hired to lead created obstacles with their boards, staff, and even donors who had not engaged with leaders of color. Even allowed to observe other African American/Black women in executive-level roles, the experiences were not always positive examples of successful leadership. For example, Denise L. expressed the following points:

> I don't really feel like I had access to the 1%. In some ways I feel like the 1% has grown
>
> with me, in that, like it was when I started to get to more executive-level leadership that I

was able to meet them. And weren't necessarily a part of my professional journey. I

didn't really know personally, or well, Black women who were running organizations.

There was one person who was about my age, maybe a little bit older, who I would have

lunch with and talk with, and she was the executive director of a really small sort of like

youth program. And what I saw was somebody who was, who had kind of like, been

internally promoted within that position, but never really felt like she had, and she would

describe this, didn't really feel like she was able to actually come full circle, as a result of

being with the same organization for so long. So, while she felt like she had the title, she

wasn't necessarily going into that role feeling like she had gained the professional

experiences that prepared her fully to lead a Board, and to provide like real leadership to

the staff, etc. And what I saw was somebody whose trajectory was significantly shifted in

a bad way by people who didn't actually invest in her full leadership potential.

Elise W. shared similar experiences, stating:

While I had befriended and I had gotten to know executive directors who were Black,

those that are older than I am really weren't accessible to me when I was becoming an

executive director. And part of that, I would say, was that competition factor. I think I

was threatening on some levels. Not because of my personality, but just being a couple

years younger, a couple, a couple years, more energetic and excited about my career

trajectory. And so, I didn't I just didn't find, um I didn't find Black people willing to

invite me in.

To overcome the obstacles blocking their career trajectory, the participants also described

needing to work twice as hard to achieve the same results as their White counterparts.

Working Twice as Hard

Each of the eight African American/Black women in the research study expressed feelings of exhaustion and frustration with the expectations put upon them to work harder than their White peers for less recognition and growth opportunities. Four of the participants shared similar sentiments. Denise L. stated:

We've done it for our community. We do it for other communities. We do it at work. We do it in church. We do it everywhere we go. Wherever there is a Black woman, they are in there helping and keeping things together. And I don't think that their contributions should be overlooked.

April B. shared a similar sentiment, providing:

You know, my mother told me one thing when I entered the workforce. She said, "it's like this baby, you gonna have to work twice as hard to keep up or twice as hard to makeup; there's no in-between. If you want to be good at your job, if you want to make you know progress on your in your work, this is what you're going to have to do." You know, and she said, "because there's nothing in the middle really for you, not when your Black."

Candace J. also provided her perspective, saying:

It's exhausting. It is exhausting. Not only mentally but intellectually taxing. It physically can wear on you. I often feel invisible. What do I need to do to say, "Hey, here I am, listen and hear me?" Because oftentimes I can say something, and then someone White can say something, or a White female can say something, and it's heard. And it's like, well, did I just say that. And then having to stay composed during that time and not be angry. Because then that perpetuates into the angry Black woman, and it's like no, that's

not it. And so having to constantly decipher and filter. Okay, is this the personal attack on you being African American? Is this an attack on your expertise? What is it? So, when I'm in meetings, it's like I'm always filtering, and that can be exhausting.

Denise G. weighed in, stating:

It's exhausting when you know that you're the smartest person in the room, and you have to bow down to; what word is it I'm looking for? What is it when it's just average? Mediocrity. And even when we're not, they put those labels on us anyway, right. They just put them on us, even if that's not even the case.

Several participants described the experience constantly needing to prove themselves or being under scrutiny as emotionally taxing. For example, Megan M. stated:

I think the only thing that I think I kind of said it, but Black women have been running things since the beginning of time, right. And I think we have done ourselves, maybe have done ourselves a disservice in thinking that we have to have everything in order and in line. All the i's dotted all the t's crossed before we apply for that job, before we go for that promotion, before we take the leap to be the CEO. And our White counterparts, especially men, do not. They see the job that they want, and they make their story fit the job that they want.

Louisa M. shared a similar statement, offering:

I would say that any Black woman going into an executive director position if you're coming up after a White person is going to have to work twice as hard. You're going to have to do twice as much as that White person was doing to look just as good in the eyes of your board and probably your funders. In the eyes of your donors, you're going to be under a microscope. They're gonna be watching every single thing that you do right and

just waiting for you to screw up. And so you have to make sure that you're just not going

to screw up right . . . I certainly looked around and saw women who were attaining,

White women who were attaining high-level positions without advanced degrees. And

you know, given that our institutions are still, you know, in a White supremacist nation

and are still largely run by White men who are going to try to repress Black women in

particular. And yes, as I said, you have to be twice as good to look just as good. I knew I

was going to need the education to get where I wanted to be.

The overarching experiences were described as exhausting and challenged each

participant in various ways to consider the cost of leading organizations. One of the approaches

each of the participants considered was ensuring they had alignment with the cultures of the

organizations they were thinking or had the opportunity to lead.

Aligning With the Organizational Culture

The eight African American/Black women who participated in this study all identified the

executive-level leader as the one that sets the organization's culture. The elements of

organizational culture that were most common amongst the women were shared leadership,

opportunities for staff development, and an environmental fit for a leader of color. Denise L.

described being intentional about entering a work environment that was authentically on a

journey toward becoming an antiracist organization. April B. identified a culture that celebrated

staff wins and promoted a growth mindset. Both Candace J. and Denise G. fostered a culture that

influenced systems change in and outside their organizations. Participants shared leaders who

partnered with their staff in developing the organizational culture experienced the most success

with maintaining an environment that was supportive of the mission and goals. Participants also

described supportive work environments as having espoused values of being participant-focused, working toward racial equity, family orientated, innovative, and fun places to work.

Summary

Chapter 4 presented comprehensive findings from semistructured interviews with eight African American/Black women executive leaders from Washington state of the Pacific Northwest region. The research design was identified as a qualitative phenomenological study constructed to understand the lived experiences that contribute to limitations of African American/Black women in leadership roles or to progress along their career pipeline toward such positions. The data collection process was highlighted as being drawn exclusively from a network of African American/Black women who the researcher had direct knowledge of being engaged as mid- to executive-level leaders in the nonprofit sector. Several instruments were used in the data collection process, including a demographic questionnaire to ensure each participants met the inclusion criteria, and an interview protocol to collect data based on open-ended research questions. The researcher also conducted a thematic analysis of responses from the open-ended questions to identify themes in the transcribed text by analyzing the interpretation of words and sentence structure. Participants were selected through a process that included identification by the researcher from workgroups. Some participants were also identified through a pseudo-snowball-sampling process. Participant profiles were shared to provide an overview of the eight African American/Black women in this study.

Chapter 4 also captured the findings from the semistructured interviews with eight African American/Black women, who shared their lived experiences in mid- to top-level leadership roles in the nonprofit sector. The findings were categorized according to the two research questions designed to capture both the women's lived experiences along their career

trajectory, and the strategies, environments, and resources that impacted their success. Themes emerged in the study that provided a deeper understanding of how each woman navigated their leadership roles, as reflected in the interview summaries and direct quotes that highlighted pride in the work, exhaustion with the obstacles, and strategies other African American/Black women could consider along their career trajectory.

Chapter 5 expands the discussion of the findings in response to the research questions. Recommendations are provided based on the contributions from the participants in the research study, and additional literature is applied to new concepts emerging from their responses. Theoretical, social change, and future research implications are also discussed.

Chapter 5. Discussion

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of African American/Black women in the mid- to senior-level leadership roles, and the lack of equitable opportunities in the workplace prohibiting them from attaining and retaining executive leadership roles. The first three chapters of this dissertation offered an introduction to the problem surrounding leadership capacity and development, a review of the literature to understand the African American/Black women's experiences in the workplace, and a description of the methodology for researching the methodology data collection and analysis.

Chapter 4 presented the findings that emerged from data collection and analysis using the conceptual framework constructed for this study. Eight women who identified as African American/Black and had experience as leaders in nonprofit organizations in Washington state were included in the sample. The eight themes that emerged from participants' experiences were outlined in Chapter 4: (a) adequately prepared on the job, (b) opportunities to prepare outside the workplace, (c) observing the experiences of other African American/Black leaders, (d) the path leading out the door, (e) characteristics of an executive-level leader, (f) overcoming obstacles, (g) working twice as hard, and (h) aligning with the organizational culture.

This chapter expands the discussion of the findings in response to the research questions. The researcher identified extracts of participants' lived experiences that were most significant to the focus of this study, and combined them into a paragraph to create a collection of narratives that follow in the next section. Answers to the research questions were introduced with the collection of narratives, highlighting why, how, and in what ways African American/Black women continue to be marginalized in the nonprofit sector as they seek to attain and retain

executive-level positions. Also discussed are the theoretical, social change, and practice and future research implications.

Discussion

The findings of this study provide a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of African American/Black women leaders, and insight into why these women are still underrepresented in executive-level leadership roles in the nonprofit sector. During the interview, each of the eight African American/Black women participating in the study was asked to answer 19 questions derived from two overriding research questions. The research questions focused on (a) experiences along the career trajectory of becoming executive-level leaders, and (b) strategies, environments, and resources that support the attainment and retention of executive-level positions.

Experiences Along the Career Trajectory

Research Question 1 was: What lived experiences of African American/Black women in executive-level leadership roles in the nonprofit business sector? Participants responded to open-ended questions about career trajectory, citing experiences of (a) gaining the skills and knowledge to attain executive-level positions, (b) working harder than their White peers for the same opportunities, and (c) having opportunities blocked by gatekeepers as being the main factors to the limited representation.

Gaining the Skills and Knowledge

Authorities on organizational leadership conclude executive-level leaders establish the organization's direction as the leading strategist, visionary, and decision maker (Daft, 2016; Kouzes & Posner, 2012; Schein, 2010). They suggested leaders be prepared with the skills and experience to direct organizations to achieve strategic plans, drive advocacy and public relation

agendas, be the primary spokesperson, connect with key stakeholders, lead by example, and define the organizational culture. Participants in this research study described executive-level leaders as being able to work well with others, analyze data, be a spokesperson, strategize, fundraise, lead boards and staff teams, and manage the finances. The participants also shared various forms of education, training, and professional development that prepared them to demonstrate they could lead organizations.

All eight participants had at least an undergraduate degree, and most participants held graduate-level degrees, including two participants with doctorates. Each of the participants voluntarily engaged in training and professional development, such as on-the-job leadership development programs, executive leadership certificate programs at universities, and online learning experiences. According to Schock et al. (2019), women have made significant investments to prepare for career opportunities, leading to more university degree holders than men. Research conducted by Thomas-Breitfeld and Kunreuther (2017) reflected very little difference between Whites and people of color in education level, with slightly more people of color having terminal degrees (e.g., PhD, JD, MD). Yet, a significant gap was identified with fewer people of color attaining CEO or senior management roles than the White participants in the study. Comparatively, Byars and Hackett (1998) posited African American/Black women are more educated and have a broader range of workplace experiences then African American men; yet, they continue to face inequities in access to higher level positions than their White female counterparts.

Further disaggregation of the gap for people of color reveals African American/Black women are promoted slower than any other group, and are consistently underrepresented in senior leadership roles (McKinsey & Company, 2020). Even with increases in education and

experience in mid-level positions, African American/Black women continue to experience inequality in achieving the highest levels of leadership compared to White men and women, and other people of color. There is an experience that could be described as "the squeeze," where African American/Black women meet all qualifications and have all the skills of a good leader, and bring diversity of thought and culture to the leadership table. Even still, they are not valued in the same manner as White men and women, or even Black men and Asian women, due to the stereotype threat at the intersection of their race and gender (Delgaldo & Stefancic, 2012; Steele, 2010).

Working Harder Than Their White Peers

Each of the eight participants shared experiences working harder to prove their education, skills, and experience were adequate for the executive-level roles they desired. Several of the participants identified times they had sought out guidance from their supervisors, board members, and even executive coaches to determine approaches they could take to demonstrate their capabilities. Yet, they were often denied the same career growth opportunities as their White peers, who did not have equal education, skills, and experience. A recent study on the career pathway of women of color in the nonprofit sector revealed they experienced not being given the same opportunities for promotions as their White and male counterparts with fewer qualifications (Bui, 2019). Women of color described being passed over for opportunities for new jobs or promotions, often in favor of White and male candidates with fewer qualifications. The women in the study also highlighted, unlike their White and male counterparts, they were also not given opportunities to participate in projects that would allow them to demonstrate the skills for promotion. Beckwith et al. (2016) asserted African American/Black women must work harder than their counterparts to attain and retain executive leadership positions. They identified

self-efficacy as an essential trait to maintain self-confidence and the determination to push

through barriers and overcome challenges impacting their ability to succeed along the career

path, mainly when gatekeepers influence their directions along the path toward executive-level

leadership.

Blocked by Gatekeepers

The eight participants described experiences with gatekeepers or individuals who either

supported their opportunities to become executive-level leaders or hindered their progress. These

gatekeepers were identified as top-level leaders, board members, and colleagues who had the

power to hire decisions or influence hiring managers. Vinkenburg (2017) identified gatekeepers

as individuals holding organizational positions of power to make decisions that shape careers by

selecting, promoting, and supporting the staff in organizations. Several of the participants had

figured out ways to manage their relationships with gatekeepers as a means of climbing the

career ladder to executive-level leadership. In contrast, others were blocked from progressing

beyond mid-level leadership positions. Those who experienced progression were also expressive

about the exhaustion and emotional toll that required perseverance and strong support networks.

One participant, Denise L., even described the gatekeeping as being external to the

workplace, in community, and with other African American/Black people, stating:

> I will say that I did start to feel in the previous community that I worked in that there was
>
> a certain amount of gatekeeping in that the few Black women in leadership or that were
>
> rising in organizations were all ones who kind of went to the same churches and had the
>
> same social networks, and maybe we're Black alumni of the same institutions, etc. And
>
> while I didn't necessarily feel like they were trying to intentionally marginalize me from
>
> career opportunities or anything like that, I do feel like it does change how you can relate.

Because you didn't grow up in that neighborhood or that church, or that sort of thing. But

I also felt like I expected a certain amount of that when you are the person who is moving

in new to communities that are already established, so I just didn't really see it as like

personal. But as a way of this is a separation, you know I'm not going to just like start

going to the church just to or anything like that, and so we would have to relate on a little

bit of a different level that wasn't as intimate. . . . I do think that redlining and

gentrification has contributed to a certain fragmentation, where maybe people don't feel

like the only people that they can trust are in community because those communities have

been largely broken up . . . And so I just think that it depends on the environment. It

really does depend on the environment. If we're talking like sort of smaller towns,

smaller cities, smaller states, where a lot of those social connections are fully established

and still going and thriving, then it can be a gatekeeping experience if you're on the

outside.

Strategies, Environments, and Resources

Research Question 2 was: What strategies, environments, and resources support African

American/Black women in attaining and retaining executive leadership roles in the nonprofit

business sector? The participants shared common strategies, environments, and resources in

seeking to attain and retain executive-level positions. Examples included (a) seeking out mentors

and sponsors to support their career goals, (b) being in a workplace environment that was

supportive and conducive to growing as a leader.

Mentorship and Sponsorship

The participants described the need for and benefits of both mentorship and sponsorship,

although they were identified as differing in how each is used in leadership. Irby (2014)

described mentoring as a relationship between two people in which the senior mentor is offering guidance to a junior protégé. Khosrovani and Ward (2011) revealed African American employees lacking access to mentors equally to European Americans will probably not enjoy the same career rewards of promotions and pay raises. Garvey et al. (2014) emphasized mentors are beneficial to the development of managers or leaders, opportunities to change positions in the workplace, promotion to senior positions, support change, and improved performance. They described professional mentors as more helpful in highlighting learning gaps for mentees and offering networking opportunities into larger networks, increasing knowledge, and adding leadership abilities.

In contrast, friends and family members who act as mentors have established trust in the relationship that allows them to suggest changes in a person's attitude, thinking, behavior, and performance, and help develop various mentees' skills. Bui (2019) reflected women of color are often required to look outside for mentors, as they are consistently passed over for such opportunities in the workplace. One of the participants in this research study, Louisa M., provided an example of seeking out friends to fill in the role of mentor along their career trajectory, stating:

> Yes, so they are part of a group that, I would say, are my not only friends but mentors.
> There have actually been some White women who are also my very dear friends who
> have held executive-level positions in private, nonprofit, government, and institutions of
> higher learning. And because they are my friends and understand who I am and who I am
> as a Black woman, I've been able to lean on those relationships for guidance and
> mentorship and friendship and support and advice.

In comparison to mentorships, sponsorships are classified by the Center for Talent Innovation (2019) as going beyond providing guidance to using their relationship and social capital on behalf of the protégé to open doors and secure seats at executive tables. The eight African American/Black women in this research study described experiences of being excluded from informal social networks and have a harder time obtaining sponsors to speak about their work so they can obtain executive-level positions. They recognized the need to have supervisors, board members, and influencers in the community to be spokespersons on behalf of the skills, experiences, and characteristics that prepared them for promotions and attainment of executive roles. A participant in this research study, Elise W., shared a perspective that aligned with the literature on sponsorship, stating:

> I would say when it comes to mentoring; it's important to have a mentor and a sponsor. To have an idea where you want to go and to cultivate that relationship with a mentor, but then also find a champion. Someone who can help you think beyond where you think you want to go . . . And if you are a mentor, I mean excuse me, if you're the mentee, it's really your responsibility, or it's really the mentees responsibility to cultivate that relationship and to use that mentors time well. And then sponsorship, sponsorships are a little different . . . You know, when I think of sponsorship, well, I guess, I was thinking of smaller nonprofits. I guess that was the "who's not speaking for you when you're not in the room" . . . I think a good mentor or sponsor would be someone who could speak for you in your absence and give you feedback as needed.

Another participant, April B., also shared, recalling:

> I had some really good mentors there as well. One particular woman was not assigned as my mentor. I just made her my mentor. I made an appointment and walked in. I told her,

"you're going to be my mentor because I need to talk to a sister while I'm here." And this was up at predominately White institutions. And she was the only Black female up there . . . So she gave me a lot of good advice about when you start thinking about putting your career together, and as you want to start moving up when you look to move up, don't discount the idea that you may have to leave in order to move up.

Beyond the resource of mentors and sponsors, the participants acknowledged the need to work in environments that supported their development and growth as leaders.

Workplace Environment

The eight participants in this research study described workplace environments with an organizational culture that was a good fit for them as African American/Black women in leadership, and held espoused values aligned with their own. The organizational cultures identified as best situated for the participants had a shared leadership approach to managing and developing staff, engaged in systems building and change work, and being mission aligned. Daft (2016) asserted the organization's goals, strategy, and culture influence how staff, including those at the leadership level, are expected to behave and carry out their work roles. Daft also shared when the environment of an organization is too unstable and complex, it can lead to a high level of uncertainty, which could impact leadership success. Rhein (2013) described organizational culture as being built on the attitudes, beliefs, values, norms, and behaviors of everyone engaged with the organization, yet, filtered from the top down. In comparison, Maclachlan (2010) identified work culture as being focused on the experiences with colleagues and stakeholders impacted by the organization while also tying in family and community.

Participants also described the need for organizations to have espoused values of being participant-focused, leading with racial equity or diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), familial,

and fun. According to Schein (2010), organizations must ensure the espoused beliefs and values of internal and external stakeholders align with the mission, strategic goals, core principles, and core values. Bell (1990) described the impact of espoused values for African American/Black women as follows:

> Assimilation requires blacks to conform to the traditions, values, and norms of the dominant [W]hite culture. Under these circumstances, Black professional women divest themselves of their culture of origin, the Black community. Instead, they attempt to fit into the dominant [W]hite community, where there are few models or images of Black womanhood. Compartmentalization, the alternative behavioral response, occurs when [B]lacks established rigid boundaries between the [W]hite and [B]lack life contexts. This particular response requires Black professional women to shuttle back and forth regularly between their cultural contexts, since each cultural context is perceived as distinct and separate. (p. 462)

The findings from this research study align with the literature on various vital points leading to implications on theoretical approaches, social change, and the practice of executive-level leadership in the nonprofit sector.

Theoretical Implications

For this transcendental phenomenological research study, the researcher initially selected CRT as part of a theoretical framework because of its basis for understanding how race and racism impact the career trajectories of African American/Black women. According to Delgaldo and Stefancic (2012), CRT grew out of a movement by law scholars, most scholars of color, who challenged the constructs of race and racial power in American legal culture. CRT recognizes racial power is generated by and experienced in various societal spaces, including the nonprofit

workplace. The experiences described by the research participants in this study highlighted the extent to which African American/Black women further connect their professional outcomes with not just racism, but also the intersection of sexism. In acknowledging the findings of this study to depict the intersection of experiences with racism and sexism, the researcher chose to explore intersectionality theory in correlation with CRT.

CRT Paired With Intersectionality Theory

While CRT provided the context on African American/Black women's leadership experiences through the lens of race and racism during the research process, the experiences described by the participants illuminated the theoretical perspective of intersectionality theory (Bell, 1995). CRT supported the researcher in challenging bias, privilege, and positionality in the analytical process of capturing the participants' lived experiences while observing the intersectionality of race and gender as impactful on those experiences (Delgaldo & Stefancic, 2012). According to Settles' (2006), the intersection of the Black–woman identity ranks as more important for Black women than the identities in their independent constructs. Intersectionality theory centers the identities of African American/Black women, and expands the research in understanding their identities in the context of leading nonprofit organizations. Furthermore, Crenshaw (1989) stated, "Because the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism, any analysis that does not take intersectionality into account cannot sufficiently address the particular manner in which Black women are subordinated" (p. 140). Crenshaw (1989) also stated:

> Black women sometimes experience discrimination in ways similar to [W]hite women's experiences; sometimes they share very similar experiences with Black men. Yet often they experience double-discrimination-the combined effects of practices which

discriminate on the basis of race, and on the basis of sex. And sometimes, they

experience discrimination as Black women-not the sum of race and sex discrimination,

but as Black women. (p. 149)

Most participants identified racism and sexism as the factors that contributed to their

inability to attain and retain executive-level positions. Several participants in this research study

also identified ways their ability to use self-efficacy as a skill to move along their career

trajectory was also challenged as they lived out the phenomenon of being recognized as the

"problem" women of color in the workplace (Lent & Brown, 2017; Page, 2018).

SCCT Paired With the "Problem" Woman of Colour

This research study considered organizational leadership through the lens of SCCT with

research questions that provided the framework for analyzing African American/Black women's

lived experiences in correlation with the phenomenon of the "problem" woman of colour in the

workplace. SCCT points to the self-efficacy African American/Black women use as an intrinsic

motivator to press through the barriers of racism and sexism to become executive-level leaders

(Lent & Brown, 2017; Scheuermann et al., 2014). Page (2018) described the phenomenon of the

"problem" woman of colour in the workplace as a workplace pipeline experience that is

detrimental to the career trajectory of African American/Black women. The pipeline begins with

the woman of color entering the workplace in a honeymoon phase, initially feeling welcomed

and valued. As she begins experiencing forms of oppression such as microaggressions, the

woman expresses these experiences to others and pushes for accountability. She is met with the

expectation of taking the lead in fixing the problem and eventually targeted retaliation that

depicts her as a problem employee. The end of the pipeline is being identified as no longer

qualified or not a good fit for the organization, which leads to her leaving the organization either

voluntarily or involuntarily. The phenomenon has potential implications on the gap of African American/Black women obtaining and retaining top leadership roles in organizations, as using self-efficacy skills as defined by SCCT to dismantle the pipeline proved too difficult.

The phenomenon on the "problem" woman of colour in the workplace highlights how experiences of racism and sexism require more than self-efficacy to mitigate experiences of tokenism, repetitive injury, microaggressions, and retaliation in the workplace (Page, 2018). Wilson (2011) asserted a contributing factor to workplace disparities is aversive racism, and subtle biases directly impact the ability of African American/Black workers to perform their jobs and access new roles effectively. SCCT theorizes the experiences of individuals along a career path are based on adaptations they make in behaviors and decisions that impact opportunities for growth in the workplace (Scheuermann et al., 2014). As many of the women in this study shared even when they worked twice as hard as their counterparts and persisted toward their goals of leadership attainment, the experiences of feeling good in the workplace or being recognized as an effective leader was diminished when they highlighted issues attributed to racism, sexism, or other inequities.

Stories were shared that reflected the pipeline of experiences leading to being viewed as the "problem" woman of colour, leading to several participants leaving executive leadership in nonprofit organizations with no desire ever to return. Candace J. described being in a mid-level leadership role, with aspirations of becoming an executive-level leader. She expressed starting in good standing, feeling valued and supported, yet, being fired without any clarity despite implementing a successful program. She attributed it to misalignment with the organization's CEO when trying to share practices she successfully implemented in other organizations. Denise G. shared a similar story of working in an organization where everything started fine; yet, when

she called out inequities in the organization, she was reprimanded and eventually chose to leave. She believed the executive director of the organization, a White woman, was intimidated by Black women in leadership and tried various approaches to make her feel inadequate. Denise L. stated, "the CEO at the time is somebody who took a personal interest in me and really sponsored me for things like a leadership development program," yet made the decision to leave the organization when they chose a new CEO rather than giving her the opportunity for succession. She expressed how the experience left her feeling marginalized and having distrust in organizational processes for selecting top-level leaders. Elise W. was treated well by the initial board that appointed her to be the executive director of a nonprofit; yet, she chose to leave the role when new board members joined and challenged her authority as an African American/Black woman. Her self-efficacy in that situation led to no longer believing the executive director role was a good fit, and choosing a career path of consulting and facilitating professional development experiences for other leaders. Another participant, Mary Alice B., shared she could not stand the idea of being told to do one more thing to prove she was qualified to be an executive-level leader, stating:

> I was very clear on my aspirations and what I wanted to do, and how I wanted to grow in the workplace. My ultimate goal was to be a CEO, and so I did everything. I was given so many hoops and loops that I had to go through. What I didn't recognize probably until the 4th-year of me being there was that my White counterparts weren't made to do half of that stuff . . . You know, the process that I was going through was really considered institutionalized, systematic racism. Because in her effort to help me, she kept giving me these kinds of achievements. I mean, she kept giving me these things that I needed to achieve to get to the next level of becoming an executive director to eventually become a

CEO. Every time I met those goals she had given me, then it would be five more . . . So, it kept being stuff like "well, you need to do this," but then I kept seeing my colleagues move into executive director's positions with not even half of the experience that I had accumulated.

Implications for Social Change

This research study demonstrated there had been minimal change in the workplace experiences of African American/Black women over the past 5 decades. According to Bell (1990), a U.S. Department of Labor report in 1984 revealed 10% of all African American/Black working women were employed in executive, administrative, managerial, or professional occupations. These statistics attributed the combined efforts of the civil rights and women's movements of the 1970s to shifting from these women working primarily in the service industry to more opportunities in white-collar jobs. S. Collins (1993) described the 30-year process in the United States of racializing managers by rewarding African American/Black workers with upward mobility in the workplace; however, employers declined to invest in their preparation or training to break through the glass ceiling toward executive-level positions. Many African American/Black women are still the first of their race and gender to hold a mid- or upper-level management position in organizations, with only 1% occupying seats at corporate executive leadership tables (McKinsey & Company, 2020). The researcher could not find disaggregated data for African American/Black women in executive leadership roles. Yet, reports reflect only 20% of nonprofit CEO or executive director roles are filled by people of color (Thomas-Breitfeld & Kunreuther, 2017).

Participants shared there were few, if any, African American/Black women as role models they can emulate or turn to for support along their career trajectory. Although several of

the participants spoke of social connections made through Black sororities or Black-led organizations, the majority had found themselves omitted from such networks and isolated from engaging in social activities that could support their leadership growth. Consequently, they were left to their own devices when seeking ways to fulfill their career goals. There is a need for an increase in connections, relationships, social networks, and overall representation in the nonprofit sector to ensure the career pathway toward executive-level leadership is actualized by more African American/Black women.

Few participants in this research study believed the tide is shifting, notably because the uprisings in the Black community in June 2020 helped opened the door for more African American/Black women to step into leadership roles. For example, Megan M. shared:

I think now's the time. I think there is a shift certainly happening in our country and in our culture, quite possibly the world. In a recognition that we belong here. Both for ourselves and for most of the other people. There are certainly people that are very much anti us. Because of fear. Because they know our strength, or they're scared because they know the takeover is about to happen, and we have the power and the tools to do it. So, they certainly have fear, but I think the majority are starting to recognize that there's some true genuine talent, especially in Black women, but in Black people, period. That you know, I mean statistics tell us, especially for Black women, that we got it going on. We're the highest educated, where the hardest working. Unfortunately, things have not been stacked up in our favor, as far as pay and everything else. And certainly ourselves, we, I think we have again thought we had to cross every single "T" and dot every "I" to even apply for the job. So, I think some of that as being is starting to shift, both internally for us, but the external factors as well. So, I think, hopefully, in the next few years, you'll

see more Black women leading corporations or, say, on corporate boards and leading more nonprofits, and the list goes on.

In the 1st quarter of 2021, two additional African American/Black women were promoted to the ranks of Ursula Burns, who was the first and only one ever to hold a Fortune 500 CEO role. Several of the participants proudly spoke of the influence they believe Vice President Kamala Harris has on African American/Black women securing seats at leadership tables, as she stepped into leading beside the president of the United States in 2021. For a few of the participants, the elevation of Vice President Harris represents the glass ceilings that can be broken from being affiliated with a historically Black college and university and Black sorority. Despite the barriers presented along their career pathway, many participants see the future as full of opportunity. They see their experiences as beneficial in increasing their perseverance, emotional intelligence, and leadership acumen for their next roles in their career trajectories. One of the participants, Denise L., provided the following example:

> Well, I could just say in my own sort of shorthand that I grew up with a very sort of strong Black family network. But a lot of the sort of coming into my own were experienced in schools that had largely White populations and neighborhoods that have largely White populations, as well as college that had largely White populations. And so I know in talking with women who, maybe lived in a Black neighborhood within their own sort of strong Black family network as well as felt like they had gone to school with a sea of people who looked just like them, HBCUs [historically Black colleges and universities], all Black churches, things like that. They had a different experience than me in embracing Black womanhood way earlier than I feel like I had access to that language and that ability, actually, despite the fact that I went to a predominantly White institution

that actually ended up being a very sort of transformative space for me to have really, really strong Black female friendships, as well as learning about Black feminist theory for the first time and being exposed to certain amount of scholarship that comes from experiencing life inside and sometimes outside of those circles. And so, it just made me kind of reckon with the way that predominantly White institutions were at play in my own life. And it made me in adulthood seek out the spaces where I felt like I didn't necessarily grow up with them. . . . I think that that is something I didn't reckon with until later. So, I've seen how not having access to those spaces has played out in my own life and what it has meant to me to have or to be intentional about having access in adulthood.

Even with the long history of African American/Black women working through the same barriers of racism and sexism, participants in this research study still articulated hope for a better future. Each participant shared recommendations for other African American/Black women seeking to attain and retain executive-level positions in the nonprofit sector.

Recommendations for Practice

The eight participants in this research study were asked about the advice they would give another African American/Black woman, including the leadership factors they could use to ascend to executive-level leadership. The participants shared the importance of being a relationship builder, knowing the work, and maintaining a supportive network of friends and family. Participants also expressed the need to find a mentor, engage in leadership development, set a clear pathway, stay on it, and persist past obstacles that are sure to arise. Although several participants described not having the benefit of being in the presence of the 1% of African American/Black women who have been fortunate to have a seat at the executive leadership table,

they knew it was essential to fully understand the experiences of those women who came before them. They each shared enthusiasm in the hope of having an impact on future opportunities for other African American/Black women, even other women of color in general. A few participants shared they had become mentors and sponsors for other African American/Black women to support their career growth by sharing the skills necessary to be successful leaders.

Vasavada (2014) shared a study that identified the desired skills of nonprofit CEOs to include decision making, public relations, fundraising, working with other nonprofits, administration/management, grant writing, and volunteer administration. Participants in this research study expressed the importance of organizations taking responsibility for the professional development of their staff to ensure they can build the skills necessary to become CEOs and executive directors. They also identified those making the decisions to promote or hire CEO and executive director positions needed to be better prepared to support African American/Black women in those roles. Organization leaders need to be more prepared for racial equity, DEI, and moving their organizations toward becoming antiracist.

The participants in this research study also identified organizations working toward racial equity, DEI, and becoming antiracist, had cultures more conducive to ensuring African American/Black women had a greater chance of success in their leadership roles. Travis et al. (2019) provided three steps for organizations to take in the beginning to dismantle system racism and sexism: (a) get educated on intersectionality, (b) establish a system for collecting reliable data on race and ethnicity, and (c) start the conversation about racism. Bui (2019) identified specific practices to make the nonprofit sector more supportive for African American/Black women: (a) listen to and value them, (b) provide support and connections, (c) develop and enforce policies for DEI, and (d) fund Black women-led organizations.

It is time for greater accountability and responsiveness to the gap in the representation of African American/Black women in executive-level leadership roles in the nonprofit business sector. There is a plethora of literature, research, and data that reflect on the benefit of having diversity of strategic thought and decision-making power at executive leadership tables (Hunt, V., Dixon-Fyle, S., Dolan, K., & Prince, S., 2020; Suarez, C., 2017; Travis, D. J., Shaffer, E., & Thorpe-Moscon, J., 2019). Based on the responses of the eight participants in this research study and guidance from other studies focused on the need to increase the opportunities for African American/Black women to attain and retain executive-level leadership roles, the researcher provides the following recommendations for practice (Bui, O., 2019; McKinsey & Company, 2019; McKinsey & Company, 2020; Mercer, 2020):

- Increase the accountability for executive leaders, board members, and other decision makers in organizations to learn best practices for supporting African American/Black women along their growth trajectory to top-level leadership roles. Since nonprofit organizations rely on funding from grants and governmental contracts, ensure they require data collection and reporting on the actions they are taking to increase racial diversity at the leadership level and reducing turnover of African American/Black women in those positions.

- Black-led organizations, institutions, and affiliations should have distinct measures and indicators of success for tracking their impact on increasing the mentorship and sponsorship of African American/Black women seeking to attain top-level leadership roles. They should also look to their members to provide professional development, executive coaching, and certification programs.

- Existing leadership learning opportunities through professional development

   programs, university-based degree programs, and online learning platforms need to

   ensure the reading and practice materials, textbooks, and curriculum are identified

   and designed through a racial equity, DEI, and antiracist lens for the benefit of both

   White and participants of color.

Given the limitations and delimitations of this research study, as identified in Chapter 1, the researcher determined the need for additional research on the topic of closing the leadership gap for African American/Black women in attaining and retaining executive-level positions.

Recommendations for Future Research

Although this research has many implications, there are still areas to be explored. This research presents a few considerations to address the executive leadership gap for African American/Black women in the nonprofit sector. Still, more work is to be done to solve this critical issue. Future research should look at more real-life applications reflected in the phenomenon described in The "Problem" Woman of Colour in the Nonprofit Workplace tool (see Figure 2). Understanding the phenomenon will help determine approaches that should be taken to dismantle the destructive pipeline that prevents African American/Black women from experiencing success along their career trajectory toward executive leadership. Future research should also look to other ways to expound how mentorship and sponsorship opportunities could be formalized for African American/Black women to strengthen the pipeline leading to increased representation at decision-making tables in the nonprofit sector. Another significant research opportunity is a longitudinal study that focuses on the factors leading to successful attainment and retention for African American/Black women in executive-level leadership roles. There needs to be a disaggregation of the current data, and an exploration of the lived experiences of a

statistically significant number of women represented in the data to truly understand the implications of racism, sexism, and other inequities in the workplace.

<p style="text-align:center">Researcher's Positionality</p>

In my research, I wanted to understand how the lived experiences of racism, oppression, and inequities in the nonprofit workplace impacted the career growth trajectory of African American/Black women. As a 49-year-old Black woman who has worked in the nonprofit business sector for 28 years, I have had my own lived experiences that led me to believe the issue had to be extended to other women who looked like me. I am experientially aware of the challenges and barriers that come with being a top-level leader. Prior to attaining my first CEO role in 2020, I served in senior executive and middle management positions for most of my professional career. With this experience, I have encountered being tokenized, microaggressions, institutional racism, racialized retaliation, discriminatory practices in every one of my workplace settings. I have experienced difficulty in being invited into prominent networks, particularly those identified as being for Black women, to mentor or sponsor me in breaking through the glass ceiling and concrete barriers of leadership growth. However, I wanted to better understand how other Black women leaders moved along their career trajectory toward top-level leadership through their stories.

After I was introduced to the phenomenon of *The "Problem" Woman of Color in the Nonprofit Workplace* at a racial equity training, my experiences were validated and the flames of my passion were sparked to be a change agent for other African American/Black women seeking leadership roles. First, I chose a qualitative phenomenological research approach to explore the lived experience of other African American/Black women with the phenomenon. Second, I decided to further shape my research design with a transcendental phenomenological approach as

a more subjective way of gathering data from participants based on the fullness of their lived

experiences, including how they feel, what they think, and what they perceived as their truth.

Lastly, I intentionally selected participants in the Pacific Northwest who had experience as

leaders in the nonprofit sector, to gather rich data that would inform my research on the

phenomenon.

My positionality on the research topic and design was intentioned to validate the

experiences I had as a Black woman seeking executive-level leadership roles in the nonprofit

sector through stories shared about the lived experience of my participants. I appreciated the

opportunity to meet one-on-one with participants, have deep dialogue around open-ended

questions, and draw from the essence of their experiences. Due to my research focus centering

around a challenging topic of racism, oppression, inequities, I had to prepare myself to listen to

the stories with a limitation on my personal bias of having similar lived experiences. I had to

practice my emotional intelligence skills of being self-aware of how I placed myself in their

stories and control my response to the pain expressed by the participants. It was often

challenging to maintain my composure because several of the participants were friends or

colleagues who would have high-fived or hugged them as personal validation of their

experiences outside of the research study. Coding data was also difficult because I had to read

through all their transcripts multiple times. I also needed to watch and listen to the recordings

repeatedly to capture the essence of their experiences. The entire research process was

emotionally draining; yet, the outcome of sharing the stories of my eight participants was worth

every moment.

I plan to apply the research tools used for my study into a practice of gathering data on

the lived experiences to inform recommendations to boards and organizations on how to hire and

retain leaders of color. Before my research study, I often shared literature from other subject matter experts on the inequities faced by leaders of color in the workplace. I provided training using the knowledge of others to help organizations move toward more equitable practices. I can now begin using my research to guide the leadership approaches of boards and organizations. Also, when gathering data to inform my training and coaching sessions, I know what good research will help drive new practices in the field. I will look for research studies and literature that have comprehensively drawn from the essence of the lived experiences of those who can best inform necessary change. I am hopeful my research will provide guidance for others along their career path, as I firmly believe my journey toward becoming a CEO would have taken less time and not been as painful with exposure to and more access to networks and mentors that look like me. I desire to expose other Black women with a goal of becoming CEOs or executive directors in the nonprofit sector, to the potential barriers along their path they can most certainly overcome with the right support.

Summary

In this chapter, the discussion of the findings in response to the research questions was expanded. A set of implications from studying the lived experiences of African American/Black women in attaining and retaining executive-level leadership positions in the nonprofit sector was also provided. The research questions were designed to explore the experiences along their career trajectory and the strategies, environments, and resources impacting their success. Mentorship and sponsorship were identified as resources these leaders used to further their leadership experiences. These experiences were all connected to the individuals either supporting the opportunities to become executive-level leaders, or hindering the participants' progress. Theoretical implications identified the connections between CRT, intersectional theory, SCCT,

and the phenomenon of the "problem" woman of colour in the workplace. Implications for social

change clarified the experiences shared by the participants in this research study had been the

same for the past 5 decades, leading to the recommendations for practice and future research.

This research study highlighted the need for deeper exploration of the pipeline that keeps African

American/Black women from securing more seats at executive leadership tables.

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Appendix A

Demographic Questionnaire

Note: The following questions and follow responses will be adapted for into survey platform, such as Survey Monkey or Google Surveys for completion electronically by participants.

To participate in the research study, participants will need to meet the following inclusion criteria: (1) identify with the construct of African American or Black, (2) identify with the gender construct of female, (3) fall between the ages of 30–70, and (4) have worked in a mid- to high-level leadership position in a nonprofit organization for a minimum of two years. The following questions will determine participant inclusion, as well as capture additional identity information to expand the data analysis:

1. Do you identify with one of the following race constructs?

   a. African American / Black, not Hispanic or Latino

   b. Asian

   c. Pacific Islander

   d. Hispanic or Latino

   e. White, not Hispanic or Latino

   f. American Indian or Alaskan Native

   g. Mixed Race

   If you have selected a response other than "a" above, then you do not meet the criteria for participation in the study. You do not need to complete the rest of the questionnaire.

   If you have selected "a" above, do you identify as:

   a. African American

   b. Black

c. Both interchangeably

2. Do you identify with one of the following gender constructs?

    a. Female

    b. Male

    c. Non-binary

If you have selected a response other than "a" above, then you do not meet the criteria for

    participation in the study. You do not need to complete the rest of the questionnaire.

3. Identify your age?

    a. 18-29

    b. 30-39

    c. 40-49

    d. 50-59

    e. 60-69

    f. 70+

If you have selected "a" as your response above, then you do not meet the criteria for participation

    in the study. You do not need to complete the rest of the questionnaire.

4. Identify the job titles you have held in your career (Circle all that apply – current and

    previous)?

    a. Entry Level

    b. Coordinator

  c. Supervisor

  d. Manager

  e. Director

  f. Associate Vice President/Vice President

  g. President/Chief Operating Officer/Executive Director

If you have selected only "a or b" as your response above, then you do not meet the criteria for

 participation in the study. You do not need to complete the rest of the questionnaire.

5. Identify type of organization you worked in a mid- to high-level leadership role (Circle

 all that apply – current and previous)?

  a. Private not-for-profit, tax-exempt, or charitable organization

  b. Private for-profit company or business

  c. Local, state, or federal government employee

  d. Self-employed in your own business or professional practice

If you have not selected "a" as one your response above, then you do not meet the criteria for

 participation in the study. You do not need to complete the rest of the questionnaire.

6. Identify the years of work experience in a mid- to high-level leadership role?

  a. less than 2 years

  b. 2 – 4 years

  c. 5 – 10 years

  d. 11-15 Years

  e. 15 - 20

f. 21-25 Years

g. 26-30 Years

h. 31+

If you have selected "a" as your response above, then you do not meet the criteria for participation

in the study. You do not need to complete the rest of the questionnaire.

7. Identify your level of education? (Circle all that apply)

a. High school / GED

b. Some college

c. Associate degree

d. Bachelor's Degree

e. Some graduate school

f. Master's Degree

g. Doctoral Degree

8. Identify the industries in which you held a mid- to high-level leadership role (Circle all

that apply – current and previous)?

a. Arts, entertainment, or recreation

b. Education— College, university, or adult

c. Education— Primary/secondary (K-12)

d. Education— Other

e. Government

f. Health care

g. Human or Social Services

h. Information Technology

i. Legal services

j. Manufacturing

k. Marketing/Communications

l. Military

m. Religious

n. Retail

o. Sales

p. Scientific or technical services

q. Software

r. Telecommunications

s. Transportation

t. Utilities

u. Other industry (please specify)

Follow up questions during the individual interview will expand on your responses in this questionnaire, along with additional inquiries about your life lessons and your experiences in advancing into leadership. Thank you for your participation.

Appendix B

Interview Protocol

INTRODUCTION

Thank you for joining me for this interview, I have a few questions to ask before we begin to ensure your confidentiality:

1) Do I have your permission to record this interview? (If you do not want to be recorded, we will not be able to move forward with the interview process. Thank you for your time.)

2) Are you in a private location where no unconsented individuals can accidently enter the recording during the interview? (If you do not have access to a private location at this time, could we identify a date and time that works better for you?)

3) Would you please click the "rename" button and delete any information in the identification box?

I am now going to push the record button and you will receive a prompt to accept the recording of this interview.

Thank you again for your participation in this research study. This research is being conducted by Angela Griffin, a doctoral candidate in the College of Education at Seattle University. As part of my thematic dissertation experience as a doctoral candidate I am interested in gathering perspectives from African American/Black women leaders in the nonprofit sector. As someone who meets the criteria for this research study, you have no obligation to participate in this interview. If you do choose to participate in this interview, you can leave the interview at any time or ask that the information not be used.

I would like to further clarify that to protect the privacy of participants,

- all transcripts will be coded with pseudonyms,

- your responses are confidential,

- only group data will be reported in the final study,

- your participation is voluntary,

- you can refuse to participate and may stop your participation at any time,

- and you may choose not to answer any question.

The interview should take approximately 60 minutes or less. If you do not want to be recorded, we will not be able to move forward with the interviews. Are you still willing to be recorded? Do you have any questions before I begin?

First Round Interviews – Career History:

1. What are the lived experiences of African American/Black women in executive-level leadership roles in the nonprofit business sector?

   a. What executive-level title(s) have you had during your career?

   b. How long did it take to reach an executive-level position?

   c. What positions have you held toward an executive-level role?

   d. What positions along your career trajectory most prepared you for an executive-level role?

   e. What positions along your career trajectory had little to no relevance in your attainment of an executive-level role?

   f. How did you prepare yourself for an executive-level position?

   g. How would you characterize your leadership experience as an African American/Black woman?

Second Round Interviews – Details of Experience:

2. What strategies, environments, and resources support African American/Black women in attaining and retaining executive leadership roles in the nonprofit business sector?

   a. What specific personal characteristics contributed most to your career development?

   b. What relationships influenced your ascension to an executive position?

   c. How did your education and training background contribute to the accent toward your top-level position?

   d. What obstacles have you overcome that caused you the most hesitation in progressing to the next level in your career?

   e. Identify three leadership factors that African American/Black women can use to assist in ascending to the next level of their career.

   f. If you are no longer in an executive-level position, what steps led to you no longer staying in the role?

   g. Why do you think the percentage of African American/Black women in executive-level positions in the U.S. is less than 1%?

   h. How did the lack of successful African American women affect the advancement of your career?

   i. What elements of an ' 'organization's culture has impacted or not impacted your progression to an executive-level position?

j. What specific espoused values have you seen demonstrated in organizations that have impacted or not impacted your progression to an executive-level position?

k. If you are no longer in an executive-level position, what role in the organization had the most influence in your decision to no longer be in the role (e.g., supervisor, colleague, direct report, board member, funder)? What were their race and gender?

l. What advice would you give another African American/Black woman aspiring to an executive-level position?