DISSERTATION

WE WILL OVERCOME: NARRATIVES OF BLACK EXECUTIVE WOMEN OVERCOMING EXPERIENCES OF IMPLICIT BIAS IN CORPORATE AMERICA

Submitted by

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ABSTRACT

WE WILL OVERCOME: NARRATIVES OF BLACK EXECUTIVE WOMEN OVERCOMING EXPERIENCES OF IMPLICIT BIAS IN CORPORATE AMERICA

The purpose of this research was to study the lived experiences of Black executive women and the barriers they faced relating to race and gender differences that influenced their leadership development and limitations in U.S. corporate businesses. My goal was to explore the lived experiences as they related to implicit bias in the workplace, how they navigated the challenges based on the intersection of gender and race in their leadership roles, and the coping mechanisms Black women holding senior level positions in corporate America used to deal with biases resulting from the effects of intersectionality. As part of this dissertation, data collection was conducted using the qualitative phenomenology method. To ensure I collected the emotions and stories of my participants, I used semistructured questions and journaled my thoughts after each interview to capture the responses from my participants. I explained the purpose of the study to each participant and asked open-ended questions to gain insights into their experiences, contributing to a better understanding of the phenomenon. The responses from the participants presented four themes and several subthemes involving their experiences as leaders working in positions not dominated by individuals sharing their racial or gender identification. The dissertation will conclude with recommendations for future research that are presented along with implications for practice in the human resources industry to help underrepresented Black women in executive leadership roles in U.S corporations.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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DEDICATION

First and foremost, I want to give God all the glory and honor for bringing me through this journey and giving me strength when I needed it most. I know without him, I am and will be nothing. I stand strong in my faith, knowing that God will continue to bless and guide me through all my life's endeavors, as he always has.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION TO STUDY

As an aspiring senior leader, my research on the underrepresentation of Black women in executive leadership roles in U.S. corporations is critical in highlighting the systematic barriers that exist. This study not only explained the challenges faced by Black women but also encouraged more programs that support inclusive policies and practices. My research aimed to drive meaningful insight and additional content within the human resource field. I hope that my study will be the fire of resilience and determination, inspiring other women of color, especially Black women, to persevere despite the obstacles they are faced with. I hope that my findings motivate Black women who aspire to be senior or executive leaders in their organizations, and recognize resilience is the key to their accomplishing their aim and their desired role.

To understand the underrepresentation of Black women in executive leadership roles in U.S. corporations, it is crucial to understand the foundational basis of systematic bias. My goal was to add supplemental research to the field and highlight the racial and gender discrimination participants faced, which hindered their career advancement and leadership opportunities. Organizational leaders who understand these challenges faced by Black women can implement supportive resource groups and environments for Black aspiring executive leaders. Additional research on the underrepresentation of Black female executives in U.S. corporate leadership can significantly enhance human resources development practices, starting from recruitment of talent. This research can help ensure that recruitment, retention, and promotion practices are distributed fairly.

The goal of the research was to focus on the underrepresentation of Black women in executive leadership roles within U.S. corporations. In this study, my goal was to understand the systematic, organizational cultures they have been part of, and the interpersonal barriers that hold

back the participants' progression into executive roles. The key questions that guided my research were: How do Black female executives identify the impact intersectionality has in their organizations based on gender and race? How do Black female executives navigate the challenges based on the intersection of gender and race in their leadership roles? What strategies do Black female executives suggest for improving and informing the cultural competence of their institutions? As a guide for not only myself, but other women of color, especially Black women, I examined not only the personal experiences of my participants, but also the strategies they implemented to successfully navigate the corporate ladder to reach their goals of being executive leaders.

My first chapter will introduce the research problem, which focuses on the underrepresentation of Black women in executive leadership roles within U.S. corporations. My second chapter will review the existing literature on prior research, the problem I researched, the history of Black women and their entrance into the workforce, systematic biases that are built in organizational cultures, and practices that have an impact on the advancement of Black women in U.S. corporations. The third chapter will examine the informing conceptual framework, followed by the fourth chapter that will be a review of my results after I interviewed my participants. Finally, the dissertation will conclude with recommendations for organizations and the human resource development field on how they can support and curate initiatives to support Black women in reaching leadership positions and improving cultural aptitude within organizations.

Black Woman Leaders in the U.S.

The study used Crenshaw's (1989) concept of intersectionality to explore the phenomenon of leadership experience among Black female corporate managers. Intersectionality focuses on the interlocking system of race, gender, and social class, in addition to the impact one individual's multiple identities have on that person's life across several domains (Davis & Maldonado, 2015; Disch et al., 2016; Kings, 2017). The problematic intersection of social identities, such as gender, race, age, and socioeconomic status (SES), leads to vastly different experiences for individuals both within and between social groups (Kings, 2017). Intersectional research analyzes and illuminates how multiple social identities' interactions influence an individual's attitude, perception, and experiences (Kings, 2017).

Understanding the lived experiences of Black female leaders through intersectionality can help create more inclusive and diverse organizations and encourage Black women to aspire to take on leadership roles. The lack of progress in Black women's leadership can be partly attributed to the limitations of the intersectionality approach and its policy recommendations. One of these limitations is the difficulty in measuring and defining intersectional effects, as the narrative-based nature of intersectionality theory hinders consensus on standardized measurement approaches.

Javadi et al. (2016) reported that women comprise 75% of the U.S. health workforce. Despite women's contribution to U.S. progression, male leadership overshadows women's (Bailey & DiPrete, 2016; Javadi et al., 2016). The main reason behind this differential recognition is the traditional patriarchal system that remains relevant even in the U.S. (Hazel & Kleyman, 2019). Although Ruggles (2015) discussed the gradual waning of patriarchal structures in the United States, citing the increase in divorce rates and rising women's independence,

gender parity in executive leadership remains a mirage. Black women and other minority women find it more challenging than men and majority women because they face systemic obstacles when accessing leadership jobs (Davis & Maldonado, 2015). According to Antoninis et al. (2018), "the continuing dominance of men in decision-making posts limits women's voice in and ability to influence policy design at international, central, and local government levels, as well as at the level of organizations and communities" (p. 1). Although women's contributions have been understudied and undervalued, scholars call for women's leadership recognition and appreciation (Bailey & DiPrete, 2016; Javadi et al., 2016).

Despite the undervaluing and understudying, the representation of Black women in leadership positions has significantly improved over the years, considering that women were deprived of their rights, including the right to employment, the right to own property, or even voting in the first half of the 20th century. For this reason, the attainment of absolute gender parity will likely be delayed beyond the current generation. In 2018, the Global Gender Gap Report, revealed that 68% of the gender gap had been closed, which was only a marginal change from the year before. This meant that 32% of the gap remained to be closed (World Economic Forum, 2018). According to the World Economic Forum (2020), "based on the rate of progress between 2006 and 2019, it will take approximately another 100 years to close the existing gender gap" (p. 22). Therefore, more needs to be done to attain a world that is friendly to Black women executive leaders in U.S. corporations.

Historical Background

The combination of racial and gender discrimination against Black women is based on a deep-rooted historical bias (Powell, 2019). Evidence from the historical literature demonstrates the many barriers Black women face are based on deep-rooted historical bias. Black women’s

cultural affiliation interweaves with the harsh legacy of slavery, which carried dehumanizing acts of bondage, rape, and compulsory labor as a part of her heritage (Wilson, 2021). As oppressed individuals, Black women tend to be forced to surrender their cultural affinity to Blackness and womanhood, creating conflict by splitting their identity (Wilson, 2021). There is also an expectation that Black women will live up to stereotypical historical images that have plagued Black women since slavery and into their current identity in the workplace (Nuriddin et al., 2020). The two opposing matriarch and victim images of Black women in the social science literature suggest that Black women are strong, competent, self-reliant, and dominant, or are suffering due to the double jeopardy of being Black and a woman in a racist, sexist society (Pickett & McCoy, 2019). Other historical stereotypical images such as Mammy, Jezebel, and Sapphire play a role in the workplace perception and treatment of Black women (Dickens et al., 2019). The Mammy is a nurturing and supportive advocate for Black individuals in the organization, whose nurturing qualities tend to overshadow her professional strengths (Carter & Rossi, 2019; Dickens et al., 2019). The Jezebel is the aggressive Black woman whose competence and talent are overlooked by their desire to do anything to achieve professional success (Carter & Rossi, 2019). The Sapphire is described as aggressive, rude, loud, and sometimes lazy, with the ability to talk back and respond in an assertive tone, which some use to be manipulative by using race to obtain sympathy in the workplace (Dickens et al., 2019).

There are also emerging images named Crazy Black Bitch (CBB) and Superwoman that affect Black women in the workplace, especially as they aspire to become leaders (Thomas et al., 2022). The CBB is vindictive, unstable, aggressive, overly argumentative, and will stop at nothing to obtain success, but has significant issues with maintaining relationships and loyalty in professional organizations (Leath & Mims, 2021). The Superwoman is an overachieving,

independent, strong, and gifted Black woman who is expected to do it all and handle countless work-related tasks without fear or insecurity (Carter-Francique, 2020). These controlling depictions of Black womanhood are essential to consider as they subvert a Black woman's work ethic and commitment to managing and balancing their family and work (Leath & Mims, 2021) The events of these early periods experienced by Black women shaped the perceptions society had of them, their value, and their emotional significance.

To try and navigate themselves from these stereotypes Black women often feel that they need to work harder than their peers to ascend in their careers. Numerous accounts have been taken where Black women reported seeing employees who looked different than themselves advancing more rapidly with fewer credentials and experience (Brown et al., 2010). A study by Davis (2012) included Black female executives in academia and business to understand how their experiences differed from women who did not identify as Black. One participant noted a need to work harder than everyone else in her cabinet (Davis, 2012). In a peer-reviewed article on the underrepresentation of Black women executives, Beckwith et al. (2016) cited work from other studies that validated both the rise in expectations and the need for Black women to exceed expectations compared to their female peers. A study of female Black midlevel managers revealed the frequent need to meet higher standards (Mitchell, 2018). This was related to a participant who confessed that her White male boss had higher expectations of her when she took time off from work compared to his expectations of her White coworkers (Mitchell, 2018). The need to work harder than peers is also reflected in CTI's corporate racial study citing that 69% of Black women professionals feel like they must work harder to advance versus 16% of White women (CTI, 2019).

Purpose of the Study

While the number of Black female leaders has grown in Fortune 500 companies, many improvements are still needed for opportunities to reach the C-Suite level. The Fortune 500 is an annual list of 500 of the largest U.S. companies ranked by total revenues for their respective fiscal year. In 2020, women had made history and held the top jobs at just 37 out of 500 companies, a record of 7.4%, and yet, none of these women were Black (Smith, 2021). In 2014, Ursula Burns, the first Black woman to ever run a Fortune 500 company, stepped down from Xerox. Now, two women have been able to break the concrete ceiling and will make history in 2021. Rosalind Brewer was named the new CEO of Walgreens on March 15, 2021, and on May 2021, Thasunda Brown Duckett was the third Black woman to lead a Fortune 500 company when she became the CEO of TIAA (Smith, 2021). While the accomplishments of Brewer and Brown Duckett are worthy of immense celebration, their unique, individual leadership roles are decades overdue. In this research, I aimed to understand how the lived experiences of accomplished Black female executives in business help reveal the systemic mechanisms working against Black women in corporate leadership roles.

In the existing literature, there are few accounts of how Black women overcome barriers to leadership or how organizational leaders can implement more effective ways and programs to support Black women in their quest to obtain executive roles. The purpose of this qualitative descriptive study was to explore how Black women in executive leadership roles describe their experiences of opportunities, challenges, and support with a focus on the intersectionality of race and gender in U.S. corporations.

Black women often face a unique set of challenges and experiences as they navigate leadership roles. This intersectionality does not simply mean they experience the additive

challenges of being Black and being a woman, but rather, they face specific issues arising from the combination of these identities. Therefore, more needs to be done to attain a work environment that is friendly to Black female leaders.

Summary

This dissertation will advance the chance to determine the racial and gender issues that impact Black female managers while providing leadership to organizations in the United States. The foundational aspect of this study is that it allows for the understanding of experiences among Black female executives. It also presents an opportunity to determine intervention measures that could help Black female executives deal with adversity related to race and gender issues that affect their leadership stance. Illuminating the disparity gap brings awareness and encourages diversity and inclusion programs to support Black women in their leadership journey. The study is also significant because it compels educators and Black female leaders to acknowledge that a problem exists and uncovers a community of peers with similar experiences. The findings can be used to inform policy changes that enable Black female leaders to access opportunities and thrive while in governance positions and elevate the voices and experiences of Black women in US corporate businesses.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

The purpose of my research focused on the underrepresentation of Black women in executive leadership roles in US corporations. In corporate America, Black women are less likely to get promoted or receive mentoring support, despite all the qualifications they bring into the workplace. Since the passage of the Civil Rights Act in 1964, years of resilience by professional Black women, the progress of Black women toward top management roles and greater economic well-being and influence remains exceptionally low to nonexistent compared to their White counterparts (Roberts & Mayo, 2020). In American culture, society has portrayed Black women as more masculine, less intelligent, less competent, and less reliable than their White counterparts (Powell, 2019). The study serves as a model for other Black women seeking advancement into leadership positions, gives insight into issues in the workplace that are often ignored, elevates the voices and experiences of Black women in corporate businesses, and adds research to the human resources development industry. This integrated literature review seeks to support the need for current research and the historical background information necessary to structure the rationale and conclusion of this research. Integrative research was a critical piece to address the underrepresentation of Black women in executive leadership roles in U.S. corporations because I was able to use a combination of diverse perspectives from theorists and insights from other disciplines. This approach allowed me to combine and review both qualitative and quantitative data to uncover the systematic barriers participants experienced and highlight their personal experiences that other methods may overlook.

The following section outlines the strategies I used to research my topic, the types of resources that were most helpful, and the reasoning behind these choices.

Literature Search Strategy

The search strategy for this integrative literature review consisted of an electronic search through all databases, including peer-reviewed literature, books, news, articles, and dissertation studies. The following phrases were used to identify applicable references in the databases: *Black women executive*, *Black female executives*, *employee resource group*, *affinity groups in the workplace*, *groups*, *work teams*, *work groups*, *benefits of groups*, *social identity theory*, *perceived organizational support theory*, *intersectionality*, *Black feminist theory*, *Black feminist consciousness*, and *Black feminist*. A Google search using these terms was also conducted to identify journals that best highlighted the topic: *Review of Educational Research*, *Review of Research in Education*, *Educational Research Review*, *Educational Psychology Review*, and *Psychological Review*. The Google search engine was also used to capture content related to historical movements in the United States and information from the U.S. Census Bureau regarding employment data. Research parameters were limited to peer-reviewed articles published between 2014 and 2022, except in circumstances that called for a historical foundation of a study that was so closely tied to the topic that its reference was needed for clarity. References found in various reviewed studies were examined for content relating to the topic. Of the over 500 studies retrieved during the search, the top 30 studies from each keyword search were thoroughly reviewed to ensure saturation of each topic.

Conceptual Framework

Intersectionality and Black Feminism Theory

This section traces some precedent works on intersectionality, not only to understand their theoretical lessons, but also to carry on their commitments which have been inherited and developed by Black women, other women of color, and Third World feminists. As the development of intersectionality is inseparable from Black women, women of color, and Third World feminists and their works, I will review the literature of intersectionality and feminist theory together so as not to lose their contexts, links, and overlap. This review starts with a brief definition and history of intersectionality, followed by a review of feminists of color's works. The next section narrows its focus to intersectionality as an analytical tool, introducing studies that applied intersectionality to analyze cases in various local and transnational contexts.

Intersectionality

Collins and Bilge (2016) started the first chapter of their book, *Intersectionality*, by defining the term "intersectionality." The authors acknowledged that this term is defined in various ways depending on groups and projects that have taken up the concept for their different purposes and in different contexts. In this regard, they defined the term with a general description in the first chapter, then further articulated the theory with specific historical and social contexts in the later chapters (Collins and Bilge, 2016, p. 1). Scholars emphasize that intersectionality is not just a mere analytical tool to examine various dimensions and axes involved in social systems and structures and to understand their complexities; rather, it ought to be used as an empowering and generative tool to dismantle systemic oppression and dominance (Asher, 2019; de Jong, 2013; May 2015). Anzaldúa (1990) considered intersectionality as helping to better recognize and understand various realities which have not been considered or

have been misapprehended due to the narrow spectrum of social discourses and perspectives. Asher (2019) encouraged scholars to conduct intersectional work at the "interstices" (Asher, 2005) and urged people to recognize themselves as interbeings and to challenge and work beyond binary ways of viewing the world. This implies that intersectional work is not only a theoretical endeavor to understand the world and others but also an active practice of re-examining world view and ways of being. To better understand intersectionality as a justice-oriented tool to disrupt social inequality, it is worthwhile to have some contextual understanding of how the idea of intersectionality was started, named, and developed by activities and scholars.

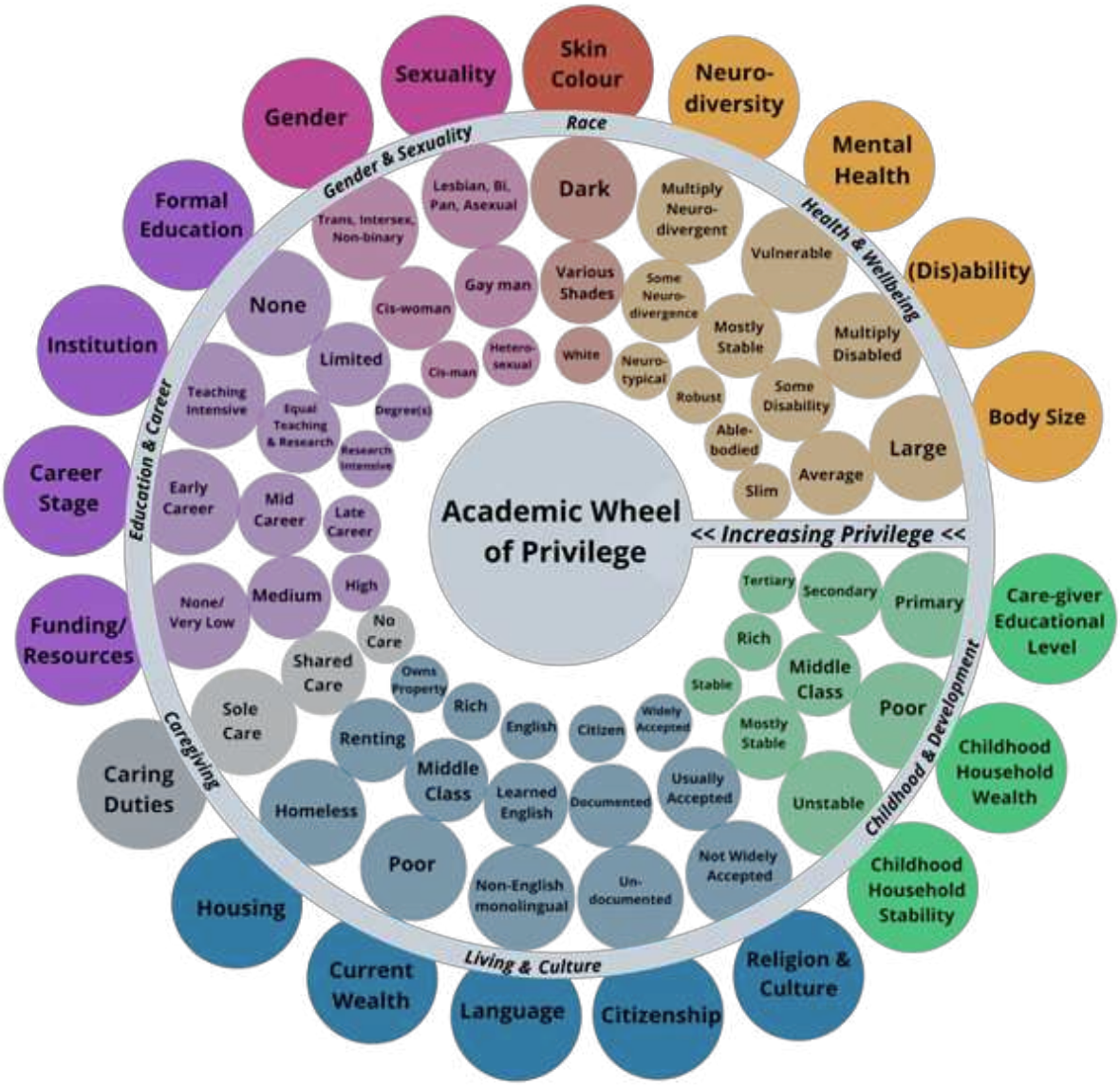
The reviews of literature from studies tracing the "origin" of intersectionality often cite Crenshaw's (1989) article as the root of intersectionality. In her 1989 article, Crenshaw conceptualized intersectionality to articulate Black women's experiences and positionalities, which cannot be properly understood with single-dimensional analysis on the basis of the narrow definitions of "Black" and "women." In her later article, Crenshaw (1991) drew explicit links to structural and political aspects of systemic exclusion and oppressions against Black women which were shaped at the intersection of race and gender. In the meantime, in the U.S., intersectionality was introduced in social movements in the late 1980s as a concept to encourage people to see diverse positionalities and tensions existing and arising in the work of Black rights movement and other social movement organizations (Cho et al., 2013; Collins and Bilge, 2016). Black women were discriminated against and excluded in the social movements and politics seeking Black rights and women's rights. Sexism was prevalent in the works of the Black rights movement; Black women's multilayered oppressions and struggles were not named properly, were denied, and were not taken into consideration (Byrne, 2015). The feminist movement also failed to acknowledge the complexity of Black and other women of color's experiences because

feminist movements and organizations were dominated by White middle-class heterosexual feminists, and the discourse was centered in their own struggles (Byrne, 2015).

Cho et al. (2013) argued that, from the beginning, intersectionality has played the critical role of promoting intersectional studies to address various levels of power relations and how they are constructed as social inequalities which also shape individual people's lives. Intersectionality informs of how risky it is to view and understand the world, others, and self with a single-dimensional perception, especially in working toward social justice (Cho et al., 2013; Crenshaw, 1991). The unique power dynamics and relations shaped by multiple factors and their interactions may be overlooked or misunderstood, since they would be hardly noticeable without exploring multiple categories and relationships simultaneously. This framework also acknowledges that individual people are associated with various social systems, structures, and powers at the same time; considering this, acknowledging how people are "inter-are" (Asher, 2019) is a much-needed mindset to proceed in intersectionality studies and practice. Figure 1 shows the different ways that intersectionality can impact one's privilege in society, created by Elsherif et al. (2025). The goal of the Academic Wheel of Privilege is to show how intersecting identities across multiple domains can have an impact on someone's life. The wheel is based on 20 identity types that span seven categories, which are living and culture, caregiving, education and career, gender and sexuality, race, health and wellbeing, and childhood and development. Appearing like a funnel, the more a person can identify with the image and move closer to the center, the more privileges they get to experience in their professional and personal life. The wheel is based on the methodology of intersectionality which was mainstreamed by Kimberle Crenshaw, to explain how the differences that we identify with have an impact on our lives and the reasons why.

Figure 1

Academic Wheel of Privilege



Black Feminism Theory

As previously described, intersectionality reflects the foundational ways that race, gender, and social class emerge to formulate the experiences of Black women (Crenshaw, 1989). Parker (2005) discussed intersectionality to understand and assess the experiences of Black women and perspectives in predominantly White organizations. Thus, intersectionality revealed

that the lived experiences of Black women about race, gender, and social class were not solely individual (Parker, 2005). Instead, overlapping spheres exist for race, gender, and social class (Crenshaw, 1989). Furthermore, traditional feminism does not represent these spheres as they interface, although traditional feminism aims to raise and address issues of gender inequality (Parker, 2005). Turock (2001) argued that feminism does not describe women as superior to men or promote feminine behaviors instead of masculinity. Rather, it describes the positive images of women rather than opposing views, such as unintelligent or fragile (Turock, 2001). It also reaffirms that women leaders are influential, knowledgeable, and trustworthy (Turock, 2001). Feminism describes feminist leadership as advocating for equality and respecting the abilities and opportunities to which women are entitled (Parker, 2005). Feminism encompasses women's rights and what women, in general, bring to society. Additionally, it includes the fair treatment of both women and men (Hailey, 2018). As such, anyone can promote the advocacy of women, and doing so would make him or her a feminist. The term feminist refers to a system of beliefs and not the traits of feminism. It entails developing women and a commitment to the development of others within society (Hailey, 2018).

In contrast, feminism refers to the actual movement that argues for equality for women (Boisnier, 2003). Elaine Hoffman Baruch was a well-known advocate. She championed subjects such as political and sexual equality (Hailey, 2018). Additionally, as Pinet (1927) stated, French writer Christine de Pizan (1364-1430) was one of the first women to fight for women's equality and against misogyny. Specified timelines outline feminism in modern Western history (Scott, 1996). Furthermore, there are three waves of events, each representing significant turning points for women. The first wave included a chain of events about feminism in the 19th and 20th centuries. The events focused on legal inequalities, such as the disenfranchisement of women

(Scott, 1996). The second wave entailed another chain of events relating to feminism between 1960 and 1980. The second wave was an expansion of the first wave, and it took into consideration issues such as gender norms, the societal roles of women, and cultural inequalities (Scott, 1996). The third wave, which occurred between the 1990s and 2000s, is credited to Rebecca Walker. Walker's (2002) publication was a response to the Anita Hill case. The goal was to express outrage based on the treatment of women by men in which men were avoiding accountability for their actions. Additionally, the third wave expanded on the second wave and extended information relevant to women, such as the inclusion of diverse populations, encompassing nationalities, ethnicities, and religions (Scott, 1996). The concept of intersectionality emerged in 1989, before the third wave of feminism. Intersectionality also became a significant part of the women's movement and added strength and clarity to women's rights' core purpose (Scott, 1996). On the other hand, the feminist theory largely developed among White middle-class women (Jackson & Jones, 1988; Hailey, 2018). These women advocated for women's rights, relevant to social, political, and economic equality. The purpose of the theory was to address the principles of inequality in women's lives, which spanned across cultures as the movement evolved (Jackson & Jones, 1988).

In comparison, Black feminism developed in the post-slavery era after 1865. Black feminism included the involvement of instrumental Black women intellectuals, such as Sojourner Truth and Frances Ellen Watkins Harper (Collins, 1996). Black feminist theory developed from early feminist theory (Hemmings, 2005; Jackson & Jones, 1988). However, feminist theory was more relevant to White women (Hooks, 2000). Despite the claim that the feminist movement sought the social empowerment of all women, it did not incorporate the issues of Black women, such as oppression and racism (Hooks, 2000). Thus, Black women had an entirely different

experience than White women regarding inequality (Hemmings, 2005; Jackson & Jones, 1988). Black feminism explains how classism, sexism, racism, and gender identity interrelate (Hailey, 2018). It also explains the lens of intersectionality. Black feminism changed during the 1960s. Black feminism included the evolution and progression due to sexism during the Civil Rights Movement (Hailey, 2018). Additionally, racism stemmed from the feminist movement (Hooks, 2008). Despite the connection between Black feminism and the feminist and Civil Rights Movements, it was distinct from the other movements (Hailey, 2018).

According to Collins (2002), the focus of Black feminism was to eradicate inequalities of gender and race, which Black women experience. During the 1970s and 1980s, Black feminists established organizations that focused on the causes Black women shared. They included Black nationalism. Black feminism developed and became more prominent during the second wave of feminism, which coincided with the Civil Rights Movement. During this period, Black women advocated for their rights and equality alongside the battle for all African Americans (Collins, 2002). Black feminism resulted in an identity specific to Black women. Some described it as strong and confident (Ford, 2015). In the 1990s, there was an even stronger presence of Black feminism. Events such as the Anita Hill Supreme Court testimony increased the movement's visibility (Hailey, 2018). The case involved a sexual harassment claim against Clarence Thomas, a nominee for the Supreme Court (Crenshaw, 1992). Thus, Black feminism also reached a broad range of audiences in 2010, when social media surfaced (Cooper, 2016). Black feminists concentrated on issues Black women face, such as inequality, and some aimed for independence as Black women (Collins, 2002). Consequently, they forged advocacy groups that addressed gender and race issues, which they experienced as forms of oppression (Hailey, 2018). As such,

Black feminism entails a convergence of complexities, encompassing the past experiences of Black women, intersectionality, and the desire for more progress in the future (Zinsser, 1993).

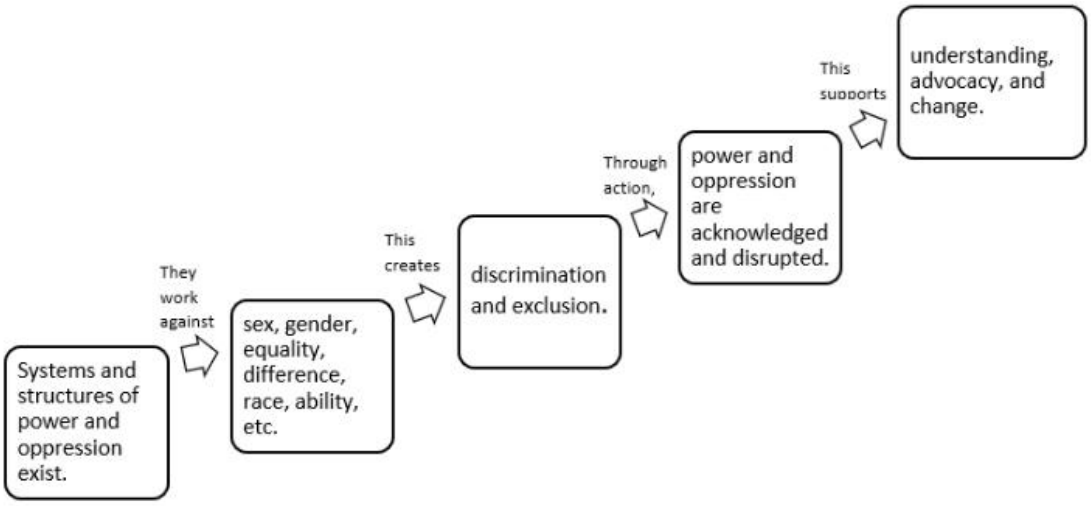
As previously noted, Black women are at a disadvantage compared to others (Hailey, 2018). A double disadvantage involves race and gender (Hooks, 2008). Double disadvantage theories suggest that Black women experience significant inequalities (Collins, 2002). As sexism and racism negatively affect Black women, Black women experience an even more considerable disadvantage than others in the labor market, especially African American males (Cotton, 1988). On the other hand, the same applies when considering White men and women (Hewlett & Wingfield, 2015; Kretsedemas, 2010; Thomas et al., 2008). Additionally, sex discrimination has more impact than racial discrimination on Black women (Collins, 2002). Cotton (1988) argued that Black women pay a cost for being African American and women in the workforce. Black feminist theory provides a conceptual framework for researching the systemic barriers that influence the underrepresentation of Black women in executive leadership roles within US corporations. The theory explains how the overlap of race, gender, and class intersections influence the experiences of Black executive leaders' women in US corporate spaces.

Lugones (2014) pointed out that the development of feminisms has not explicitly addressed different social categories—such as race, gender, class, and heterosexuality— with which women of color are associated in how they are racialized and oppressed within specific contexts and power relations. This tendency is also observable in the rising discourse of global feminism and sisterhood, which address various women's oppressions in the world. This "global" discourse allows White feminists to avoid confronting women of color's and Third World women's inequality issues by emphasizing the common victimhood experience "as woman," despite that women of color's struggles are intertwined with global Whiteness, of

which any White woman cannot be free from responsibility (de Jong, 2013; Lorde, 1984/2007). Scholars have argued that the monolithic discourse on gender invalidates and silences women of color's oppression because there is little space for various languages to articulate the complex state and condition of being a woman of color in specific contexts (Anzaldúa, 1987; hooks, 1981/2014; Lorde, 1984/2007). This discourse is rooted in the analogies between sex inequality and racial discrimination which still reproduce and perpetuate a limited and distorted understanding of gender (Lugones, 2007, 2014; May, 2015). In this regard, scholars have urged us to reconstruct the homogeneous understanding of gender, which is centered around White and masculine norms as it erases a multiplicity of genders in various cultures and races (Lugones, 2014; May, 2015). Lugones (2007, 2010) suggested that this work include unraveling functions and the arrangement of gender systems before colonization and modernization, as Western/European forces—such as capitalism—have confined the concept of gender and its functions. By understanding Feminist Theory scholars can understand how and why Black Feminist Theory was developed. In Figure 2, Roe (2025) displays how structural systems have cultures that are built with power and oppression, and how this impacts someone that has a different race or gender opposite from the dominant group, which are usually white heterosexual males. As we continue to follow the figure, we see that this can create discrimination and exclude people that are not from the dominant group, by the power of the dominant group. When understood, corporations can create policies and advocate for change to create a workplace that is fair for all, regardless of their differences.

Figure 2

Model of Feminist Theory



Women of color scholars and activists have identified how women of color are exploited and tokenized in progressive organizations and social discourses seeking diversity and solidarity, including feminist conferences (e.g., CRC, 1986; hooks, 1981/2014; Lorde, 1984/2007; Lugones, 2014; Minh-ha, 1989; Purkayastha, 2012; Yamada, 2015). Minh-ha (1989) described how women of color representatives are essentialized and objectified in organizational conferences. They are expected to represent "pure" nativism in terms of issues of hegemony, racism, and sexism, so women of color are forced to align themselves to certain figures and voices. She further criticized how White feminists seek diversity and demand differences while they want the differences to be "safe" and "not too different" so they can still secure their positions and emotions. Yamada (2015) discerned that women of color's expressions of ideological problems are often misunderstood and undervalued, dismissed as personal issues and complaints born from personal anger against dominant groups. Lugones (2007) pointed out that this lack of consciousness is rooted in feminism that has been constructed based on a narrow definition of

White bourgeois womanhood, and these "White bourgeois feminists theorized White womanhood as if all women were White" (p. 17).

The exploitation and tokenization of women of color in social discourse depend on contexts that are still implicated in the construction and maintenance of White women's womanhood. For example, after apartheid, while there has been a decrease in use of words directly indicating race in social discourse, vocabularies related to morality and rationality continue to imply racial hierarchy and binaries. Utilizing this new racial discourse, White women in South Africa have solidified their White womanhood in a better place than Black women's womanhood (van der Westhuizen, 2016). Similarly, describing women of color as lacking morality and rationality produces the discourse that they do not deserve the same treatment as White middle-class women (Espiritu, 1997; Lugones, 2007). Despite variances in patterns, women of color consistently become otherized by White women. Lorde (2007) argued that White women overlook their own White privilege and focus on their victimhood as women; then, they interpret women of color's experiences from their limited perception and experiences of being women without comprehending women of color's complexity.

Intersectionality and Black Feminist theories as Analytical Framework

Collins and Bilge (2016) summarized six themes that keep appearing in the works that employ intersectionality and Black feminism as an analytical framework: inequality, relationality, power, social context, complexity, and social justice (p. 25-30). They further explained that these themes are not always present in every analysis, and each idea is taken up in various ways (Collins & Bilge, 2016). This section reviews studies which use intersectionality and Black feminism as a framework to deepen and complicate their perspectives, analyses, and discussions with different contexts and scopes.

One of the instances shared in Collins and Bilge's (2016) book is a complicated analysis of Brazil's national discourse on national identity and the development project (p. 18-25). This discussion is followed by a section that addresses the dilemma in dealing with global economic inequity between neoliberal logic and social welfare. The authors juxtaposed the meeting of Latinidades—the largest women's festival in Latin America—with Brazil's 2014 World Cup, considering how these festivals' successes were measured and discussed in national and global discourses. While Latinidades' success was judged by the inclusivity and visibility of attendees, the evaluation of the Brazil World Cup's achievements barely accounted for social inequalities (Collins & Bilge, 2016). Through this analysis of a specific case, the authors identified political languages and perspectives describing racial exclusion and discrimination, which have been erased by neoliberal logic, which is dominant in the nation's identity construction and development agenda. Moreover, Byrne's (2015) study on citizenship and right to love highlighted the presence of Whiteness, masculinity, and heteronormativity in Britain's notion of citizenship, family, and immigration. This research exemplifies understanding social campaigns against the spousal visa policy amendment through the concept of intersectionality. Meanwhile, the author pointed out that the usage of intersectionality loses its critical power as it is used without a deeper understanding of the concept, such as being applied to mesh distinct social categories when the concept is taken up as a synonym of "junction" (para. 7.1).

Such analyses represent how the conceptualization of national and global citizenship privileges certain groups of people while marginalizing "others." De Jong (2013) observed an exclusive tendency in theories and discourses on global citizenship. Despite that the word "global" sounds inclusive and equitable, its membership is stratified based on racial, gender, and class categories. In other words, the conceptualization of global citizenship has built upon the

histories of colonialism and capitalism while concealing the histories of displaced and oppressed people (Byrne, 2014, 2015). De Jong (2013) stated that the dominant groups—many of whom are White and male—have solidified their privileged citizenships by (re)producing others both within their nations and in the transnational context. International security arrangements are a great portrayal of the exclusive and stratified membership of global citizenship; others' bodies are suspected and controlled in the name of global security, which is closely intertwined with racial inequality issues in Western countries (Purkayastha, 2012). These works illuminate the dominant discourses on global citizenship that advertise the convenience of border crossing and benefit of living in different places as exclusive for certain privileged people. For some (privileged) people, border crossing is an exciting, interesting, and convenient experience; however, for others, the meaning and experiences of border crossing are likely to be intertwined with separation, displacement, colonization, and survival—and these are the realities that privileged global citizens want to avoid in their conceptualization of the globalization and modernization of the world.

People of color's experiences of border crossing vary, such as going through airport security or an immigration center, and not all their experiences might be associated with negative emotions and dehumanizing treatments. As Purkayastha (2012) indicated, the problem of the "women of color" categorization is that individual people's experiences and positionalities within same/similar racial or ethnic groups need to be further elaborated on with global hierarchies, dynamics of genders, and various tensions intertwined with history, economy, and politics. This brings forth questions that consider whether racial privilege and domination are only associated with White people in homogenous ways as well as whether people of color are free from embodying and reproducing coloniality and racial privilege. Considering these

inquiries, scholars have complicated the concept and understanding of Whiteness—which can be understood as the collective manifestation and operation of White supremacy and domination, coloniality, and capitalism—through intersectional observation in various world contexts (e.g., Bonnett, 2002; Christian & Namaganda, 2018; de Jong, 2013; Grewal & Kaplan, 1994; Levine-Rasky, 2002). Levine-Rasky (2002) challenged the general notion of normalized White privilege and Whiteness based on the image of the White middle class in North America and Western Europe. Levine-Rasky (2002) argued that this notion fails to grasp various experiences and modes of being White in different social and historical contexts and conditions.

Meanwhile, White privilege and Whiteness have traveled to different parts of the world through colonialism and capitalism and are then transformed into multiple features. Christian and Namaganda (2018) claimed that, therefore, Whiteness ought to be taken up beyond a tool to articulate racial injustice in that people have embodied Whiteness in various forms, and the various forms are enacted in unique ways in different regions. Before moving on to the review of studies on various patterns and manifestation of Whiteness, it is crucial to note that adding extra dimensions to the understanding of Whiteness must not mean that some White people are less responsible or can escape from Whiteness and White privilege. Christian and Namaganda's (2018) transnational intersectionality study analyzes Ugandan domestic workers racialized and gendered experiences in three different regions of Uganda. This study demonstrated unique manifestations of Whiteness in Africa regarding racial power dynamics, not only among African people, but also between a Ugandan domestic worker and an East Asian ambassador. By accentuating complex power relations regarding one's positionalities in local and global contexts, Levine-Rasky (2011) explained that individual people are members of multiple domination groups and subordination groups at the same time. This also implies contradictions in

one's positionality: that certain aspects will reinforce each other in some conditions while they can contradict others. Her point reflects Purkayastha's (2012) discussion on people who are marginalized even in justice-oriented work and spaces. Often virtual communities are considered an important medium to mitigate the information gap as technology supports people having access to information from various sources as well as connecting people from different parts of the world. However, Purkayastha (2012) reminded that these communities and resources are still available and affordable for only certain people who are literate in the English language and have time and capital for the online space. This further raises questions about the optimistic scenarios of reducing inequalities through virtual spaces and with technologies that market, intellectual and social leaders have addressed. The author worried that the power inequality and marginalization will be reproduced within and through virtual communities because the development of online spaces and communications has continued in (post)coloniality, fueled by capitalism (Purkayastha, 2012). Besides, intersectionality also helps us to be alert to technologies being used not only by governments, but also by private companies, to increase the level of surveillance and control people's behaviors, words, and even ideologies (Purkayastha, 2012). These analyses elucidate multiple realities of how certain people are imagined by other people's realities—such as being otherized, not acknowledged, excluded, and generalized by privileged people—as well as how people imagine their own realities—such as feeling incapable, disenfranchised, not safe—in various spaces (including virtual communities) and times.

Postcolonial Theory

Postcolonial theory is a field of study that explores the cultural and political byproduct of colonialism and imperialism. Young (2016) identified a characteristic of postcolonialism that is distinct from the study of colonialism, imperialism, and neoliberalism: that it addresses the

ambivalence of the current state as a postcolonial world, while other fields mainly focus on understanding and critiquing oppressive power relations and practices between and within various geographical spaces and systems. Bhabha (1994/2004) introduced postcolonial theory with the enunciation of "beyond" to clarify that this field of study focuses on the understanding of the postcolonial state and identity. According to Bhabha (1994/2004), "the 'beyond' is neither a new horizon, nor a leaving behind of the past [. . .] For there is a sense of disorientations, a disturbance of direction, in the 'beyond'" (p. 1). Considering this articulation, postcolonialism is not a mere study of what happens "after" colonialism; rather, it obliges scholars to speculate the complex features of identities, cultures, society, and their interactions as they are dominated and negotiated through colonialism, imperialism, and neocolonialism/modernization. Bhabha (1994/2004) proposed a postcolonial theory with the concepts of mimicry, hybridity, the third space, and interstices while trying to develop the works of other postcolonial theorists, such as Frantz Fanon and Edward Said. In this section I review postcolonial studies based on Bhabha's work, especially the notion of cultural hybridity and the third space.

Bhabha's (1994/2004) conceptualization of postcolonialism explicates various features that are produced, manifested, and obscured in cultural differences "beyond" the usual narratives and approaches. He considered postcolonial work as happening in the "in-between" spaces which motivate people to acknowledge and (re)understand their own identities and their societies that are implicated in multiple histories, geographical spaces, generations, and power relations (Bhabha, 1994/2004). This work increases the possibilities to dismantle oppressive power relations and politics of colonialism and imperialism; however, postcolonial studies may "seem not only unintelligible but frightening and chaotic" (p. 19) because the corporate world has been dominated by positivistic values and perspectives which seek "universal truths" (Viruru, 2005).

Anzaldúa (1999) encouraged people to be patient with ambiguity, which has been negatively conceptualized by (Western) colonialists but is unavoidable when multiple cultures are acknowledged by one another and interact. Spivak (1985) urged people to vanquish a positivist vision which "can only recognize domination" (p. 85) that justifies or hides the exploitation (of others) while promulgating the advancements gained through the oppression of others.

Bhabha's (1994/2004) discussion of mimicry— "almost same, but not quite" (p. 123)— and the concept of hybridity play pivotal roles in postcolonial theory. Mimicry represents the ambivalence of colonial discourse, while it also signifies the complexity of understanding postcoloniality. Bhabha (1994/2004) positioned mimicry as "the sign of a double articulation, a complex strategy of reform, regulation, and discipline, which 'appropriates' the Other as it visualizes power" (p.122). Bhabha (1994/2004) illustrated the concept of mimicry through various literature sources and other scholars' works, such as Christianity in colonial India (see Black Algerian's racialization and self-conceptualization, p. 121-131). The story of Christianity in colonial India shows the ambivalence of colonial authority; the conversion of Indian people to Christianity seems to be successful in making Indian people have the same religious beliefs as English people. However, as the story of how the Bible was treated by people in Bengal goes, religious symbols failed to maintain their representational authority in the colonial space (Bhabha, 1994/2004). Fanon's (1952/2008) autographic theorization of racialization provides insight into how mimicry works in the self-conceptualization of the colonized. When colonized Black women try to fit into the (White) norm, the (White) colonizer will continue to practice making the Black women feel inferior to the White. As Black people and their community continue to be devalued by White society with derogatory images of them, they are traumatized through these social processes and the self-conceptualization within the context; at the same

time, Whiteness as norm and virtue is inscribed in Black people (Fanon, 1952/2008). These examples illuminate that the effective and complete control of people is never a possible project when there is always a space for refusal and resistance (Foucault, 1980; Kanu, 2005). Simultaneously, mimicry still influences the subjects to internalize colonial values imposed by the colonizer (Bhabha, 1994/2004; Fanon, 1952/2008).

If mimicry illuminates the ambivalent enactment of colonial discourse, especially the effect of ambivalence on the colonized individuals, hybridity can be understood as the ambivalent state of cultures that are represented and translated through colonial discourse. The colonialist authority attempts to subjugate people through imposing their ideologies and manners while separating the people and distorting their cultures and histories so the people will lose the power and consciousness to resist (Anzaldúa, 1987). In the meantime, discriminatory practices are required for the colonizer to consolidate their supremacy over the colonized; these discriminatory practices result in the forms of differentiation, individuation, and reconstruction of identity (Bhabha, 1994/2004). Hybridity is a collage of cultures, identities, languages, and histories of multiple locations. Bhabha considered hybridity as an "ambivalent 'turn' of the discriminated subject into the terrifying, exorbitant object of paranoid classification—a disturbing questioning of the images and presences of authority" (p. 162). For the colonized, acknowledging hybridity becomes the consciousness toward the colonialist authority and the distorted histories; in contrast, it threatens the colonizer by signifying the limitation of colonial authority and dismantling the very ground of their supremacy. In Kim's (2008) analysis on South Korean people's ambivalent view on the U.S. and Japan, she observed the incommensurable discourses of South Korean's ethnocentrism and collective inferiority to the U.S. and Japan. Even though Kim did not use the term *hybridity* to explain this phenomenon, the study

exemplifies the complicated and unresolvable features of hybridity in the South Korean context, rooted in the society's discourses and sentiment on the West, Japan's imperialism, and Japan's colonization of Korea. Individual (post)colonial subjects embody hybridity; simultaneously, they discursively produce new hybridity through individual conceptualization and collective memory.

A third space is a generative in-between space where various identities and cultures make contact and are negotiated while they are not coerced to be fixed or united. The discursive conditions of the third space can be better explained with Bakhtin's (1981) notion of heteroglossia. Heteroglossia refers to the multidimensional and multi-layered characteristics of language (Bakhtin, 1981; Barwell, 2014). This theory articulates that unitary language is socially constructed and that various socio-ideological dimensions are involved in this process, so that languages are ever-changing in use (Bakhtin, 1981). In postcolonial theory, the third space can be understood as the possibilities of rereading, rehistoricizing, and retranslating cultural differences by attending to the multidimensional and multilayered colonial discourse. A third space is possible in various formats; scholars have exemplified a third space in their aspiration of postcolonial practices. Bhabha (1994/2004) suggested that a cultural third space is valuable in the conceptualization of material borderlines. As borderline discourses unavoidably create unsolvable tensions, a third space would be a new space to reimagine ways to negotiate these tensions (Bhabha, 1994/2004). Fanon's (1961/2004) articulation of indeterminate space can be regarded as a third space; he valued the indeterminate space because this space enables people to be less obsessive about the restrictive conceptualization of cultural identity. The fluidity of the third space not only enables people to endure hybrid identities but also initiates the change of a society which has dehumanized individuals and communities in the name of unity and cultural identity (Fanon, 1961/2004).

The goal of the literature review was to provide insight into the theories and analytical frameworks to provide an understanding of this study, which focuses on the underrepresentation of Black women in executive leadership roles U.S. corporations. The theories and analytical frameworks allow scholars to validate and categorize research to contribute to others' work that may be aligned and helps scholars understand the questions at hand. The next section will go into the concept of implicit bias, and how this has a role on Black women that aspire to be senior leaders in U.S corporations.

The Concept of Implicit Bias

Implicit bias, which has become the modernized form of racism, is defined as verbal and behavioral actions that can be intentional or unintentional, communicating hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults (Williams, 2015). Since blatant racism is no longer politically accepted as a social norm, the subtle concept of implicit bias continues to go unnoticed, as these actions can catch the targeted person unsure of how to perceive or respond to the actions of the initiator. The verbal and nonverbal behaviors that implicit bias produces result from one group's exposure or experiences of another group, which can be negative or positive. One race's perception over another can be presented in multiple formats, such as direct experience, exposure to the media, family structural influences, political factors, or employment systems. These experiences also go into the workplace, based on the organizational climate. The organizational climate is the nonverbal message that a company sends to its employees regarding socially acceptable behaviors (Ziegert & Hanges, 2005). With this, whether consciously or unconsciously, Black women face higher barriers than any other racial group in the workplace (Candid, 2020).

One of the most popular tests created to measure implicit bias is the Implicit Association Test (IAT). Since 1998, the institute has reported more than 20 million responses which found that 75% of Whites and Asians demonstrated an implicit bias in favor of Whites compared to African Americans (Tyner, 2019). The IAT test is a psychological test whose objective is to measure unconscious attitudes, automatic preferences people hold that can be biased, and hidden biases people are reluctant to reveal in today's modern world overtly (Ocejo, 2020). The Implicit Association Test makes participants aware of their unconscious bias and involvement in perpetuating discrimination and inequity (Tyner, 2019). As part of the test, the institute provides training where participants can be presented with the unrecognized advantages they have based on their membership group compared to marginalized group members (Tyner, 2019). The pieces of training encourage participants to confront their personal biases and unearned privileges so that they can learn strategies that aim to reduce discriminatory thoughts and practices through their daily interactions (Pritlove et al., 2019). A limitation of the Implicit Association Test is that it is not representative of the full United States population and therefore lacks all the perspectives and racial backgrounds that can be gathered to give a full detailed conclusion (Payne et al., 2019).

Implicit bias is a behavior that the naked eye cannot always see, and therefore, most studies rely on self-reports given by participants (Ziegert & Hanges, 2005). Though these self-reports can lead a researcher to understand implicit bias, researchers must realize that some measures may be influenced by self-presentation biases, which can affect the scores to show manipulation of what participants believe researchers want to hear versus the reality of what they experience (Ziegert & Hanges, 2005). Until implicit bias becomes more recognized and defined, changes will take longer for courts to recognize and create statutes to protect victims of these

behaviors. This will allow the issue to remain an everyday reality for the female and minority employees denied certain employment opportunities due to implicit bias (Cerullo, 2013). To give solutions on the topic of implicit bias, Cortina (2008) stated that leadership has to be the ethical, moral compass of the company to implement the objective that there is zero tolerance for people that exhibit any type of implicit bias behavior and the foundation for cues on what is seen as acceptable and unacceptable behaviors in the workplace (Cortina, 2008).

Consequences of implicit bias in the workplace have been shown to have negative impacts on individuals who are targeted (Cortina, 2008). For the targeted individual, these consequences can lead to mental health concerns, negative mood, cognitive distractions, anxiety and distress, and damaged social identity (Cortina, 2008). These negative impacts will make targeted associates lose commitment to their organizations and lead to higher employee turnover rates (Cortina, 2008). Mental health is not the only effect implicit bias can have; these consequences, in return, have financial repercussions for employers as a whole, who must now absorb the costs of employee distraction and dissatisfaction, job accidents, substance abuse, work team conflict, performance decline, and turnover which has been proven to be a high financial loss for companies (Cortina, 2008).

History of Black Women in the Work Environment

Before examining the current landscape in which Black women in corporate America exist, it is important to first look back in time. A historical perspective helps individuals understand the corporate landscape in which Black women currently reside, as well as the identity and perceptions in this space. This section looks at Black women and their quest for group acceptance in U.S. corporate businesses. Understanding the historical importance informs the study by providing historical insights into the experiences Black women faced when they

first entered the workforce and highlights the challenges that impacted their career advancements and access to leadership opportunities.

In 1890, two dominant women's activist groups came together to fuel the women's rights movement, birthing the National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA; Lewis, 2019). When Black women reached out to NAWSA to participate in suffrage activities, they were met with resistance (Ansah, 2018). Black women suffrage leaders fought through NAWSA's bureaucracy, insisting they support the agenda of all women (Ansah, 2018). An example of resistance was NAWSA's 1913 parade, in which the requests from Black women leaders to integrate the parade were ignored (Ansah, 2018). Black women showed up in massive numbers and were placed in the back of the line until long-time suffrage activists spoke up and urged parade organizers to integrate (Ansah, 2018). Black women eventually marched according to their state and occupation, though it was clear they were not fully welcome (Ansah, 2018).

The fight for group acceptance did not stop there for Black women. Although the Civil Rights Act of 1964 officially ended segregation and led to more opportunities for people of color, women, immigrants, and people with disabilities (Castro & Johns, 2016; Galloway, 2016), the contributions of men in the movement still dominated historical literature and commentaries (Women in the Civil Rights Movement, n.d.). From leading civil rights organizations to serving as lawyers, Black women played a significant role in this history-making group (Women in the Civil Rights Movement, n.d.). Black women in the movement have publicly recorded their experiences, recalling constraints faced when joining the movement and difficulties around gender inequality. For decades, Black women have been impactful in their communities' advancement and their fight for justice. Although Black women had difficulty finding their place in the civil and women's rights movements, they found success in creating their groups dedicated

to addressing the needs of Black women at home, in the community, in the workplace, and beyond. The genesis for many of these groups was the first wave of the feminist movement that continued to thrive well into the 21st century (Eisenberg & Ruthsdotter, 1998). They included groups such as the National Association of Colored Women's Clubs (founded in 1896), Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority (founded in 1908), the National Council of Negro Women (founded in 1935), and a host of others that remain significant voices in national affairs.

Gender discrimination and unequal pay are barriers women face in the workplace (Dickens & Chavez, 2018; Kuschel & Salvaj, 2018). Black women often face the additional barrier of racism (Dickens & Chavez, 2018). Warner and Corley (2017) cited data from U.S. Census Bureau reports confirming that, in 2017, women of color made up 39% of the female population in the United States, 20% of the nation's total population, 38% of the female labor force, and 18% of the entire labor force. Data from Catalyst indicated that women of color comprised 18.5% of employees in S&P 500 companies in 2017 (Warner & Corley, 2017). Yet, Black women have the largest educational degree achievement compared to all groups of people of color; they are also the fastest growing group of entrepreneurs in the nation (Sims & Carter, 2019). Noninstitutionalized Black women participate in the workforce at the same pace as noninstitutionalized African American men, partly because many Black men are institutionalized (Fisher & Houseworth, 2017). Although 21% of Black women in the United States have earned college degrees, an improvement from 3% in 1970, and represent a sizeable portion of the labor force, 1% and 3% of Black women are represented in the executive/senior and mid-management levels, respectively (CTI, 2019; Morris, 2014). The numbers are slightly higher when they include all women of color (i.e., African American, Hispanic, and Asian women). Twelve percent of women of color are first-level managers, compared to 45% of White men, and 3% of

these women are at the C-suite level, compared to 71% of their White male counterparts who hold these seats (Piazza, 2016). College education and executive-level attainability are interconnected because college education is an entry into obtaining executive leadership (Gamble & Turner, 2015).

While the number of Black women leaders has grown in Fortune 500 companies, many improvements are still needed for opportunities to reach the C-Suite level. In 2020, women had made history and held the top job at just 37 out of 500 companies, a record of 7.4%, and yet none of these women were Black (Smith, 2021). In 2014, Ursula Burns, the first Black woman to ever run a Fortune 500 company, stepped down from Xerox; Now, two women have been able to break the concrete ceiling and made history in 2021. Rosalind Brewer was named the new CEO of Walgreens on March 15, 2021, and on May 2021, Thasunda Brown Duckett was the third Black woman to lead a Fortune 500 company when she became the CEO of TIAA (Smith, 2021). While the accomplishments of Rosalind Brewer and Brown Duckett are worthy of immense celebration, their unique, individual leadership roles are decades overdue. In this research, I aimed to understand how the lived experiences of some of these accomplished Black women in business help reveal the systemic mechanisms working against Black women in corporate leadership roles. In corporate America, Black women are less likely to get promoted or receive mentoring support, despite all the qualifications they bring into the workplace. Since the passage of the Civil Rights Act in 1964, years of resilience put on by professionally Black women, the progress of Black women toward top management roles and greater economic well-being and influence remains exceptionally low to nonexistent compared to their White counterparts (Roberts & Mayo, 2020). In American culture, society has portrayed Black women as more masculine, less intelligent, less competent, and less reliable than their White counterparts

(Powell, 2019). These stereotypes have impacted Black women in the workforce and how they are perceived by their peers, which has created underrepresentation of Black women in executive leadership roles in U.S corporations.

Black Women's Experiences in the Corporate Workplace

Workplace experiences can be both positive and discouraging. There are numerous accounts in which Black women reported seeing employees who looked different than themselves advancing more rapidly with fewer credentials and experience (Brown et al., 2010). Edwards (2015) reported that Black women are even vulnerable to systemic injustice outside corporate America. For example, Black women made up only 2.9% of all university faculty in the United States due to disproportionate hiring (Haskins et al., 2016). The literature also notes the historical exclusion of Black women from the social work (Barretti, 2015). Social injustice can be seen in multiple workplaces, which calls for studying intersectionality in various industries (Edwards, 2015). This study answers that call by studying the underrepresentation of Black women in executive leadership roles in U.S. corporations. The following subsections examine the African American woman in greater depth by discussing image, corporate leadership, corporate stereotypes, and barriers to success, all of which can affect an employee's organizational identification. The literature reviewed provides evidence of the unique experiences of Black women in corporate America and supports the need for a study of this specific participant population.

Image

Black women have embodied the struggle for recognition for a long time (Pickett & McCoy, 2019). They have always wrestled with derogatory views about who they are, which has shaped how they have presented themselves to the world (McCluney et al., 2021). Fifty years

ago, Black women were seen as uneducated and oppressed (Dawson et al., 2019). The media has birthed new stereotypes—the angry Black activist, the unwed mother, and other negative stereotypes (Pickett & McCoy, 2019). Even the topic of Afrocentric hair in the workplace has received much attention, which poses another layer of complexity to the image of Black women at work (Dawson & Karl, 2018). While Black women have the flexibility to present various hairstyles in the workplace, Afrocentric hairstyles in a corporate setting are often affiliated with negative characteristics (Dawson & Karl, 2018). Dawson et al. (2019) found that bias affected the hairstyle choices of Black women ascending to the executive level.

Mass media of the late 20th century defined the new Black woman as the small but continuously growing population of women entering the workplace in careers that were traditionally open to White men (Pickett & McCoy, 2019). On the other hand, Black women's cultural affiliation interweaves with the harsh legacy of slavery, which included dehumanizing acts of bondage, rape, and compulsory labor as a part of their heritage (Wilson, 2021). As oppressed individuals, Black women tend to be forced to surrender their cultural affinity to Blackness and womanhood, creating conflict by splitting their identity (Wilson, 2021). Also, there is an expectation that Black women will live up to stereotypical historical images that have plagued Black women since slavery and into their current identity in the workplace (Nuriddin et al., 2020). The two opposing matriarch and victim images of Black women in the social science literature suggest that Black women are strong, competent, self-reliant, and dominant or are suffering due to the double jeopardy of being Black and a woman in a racist, sexist society (Pickett & McCoy, 2019). Other historical, stereotypical images such as Mammy, Jezebel, and Sapphire play a role in the workplace perception and treatment of Black women (Dickens et al., 2019). The mammy is a nurturing and supportive advocate for Blacks in the organization, whose

nurturing qualities tend to overshadow her professional strengths (Carter & Rossi, 2019; Dickens et al., 2019). The Jezebel is the aggressive Black woman whose competence and talent are overlooked by their desire to do anything to achieve professional success (Carter & Rossi, 2019). The Sapphire is described as aggressive, rude, loud, and sometimes lazy, with the ability to talk back and respond in an assertive tone, which some use to be manipulative by using race to obtain sympathy in the workplace (Dickens et al., 2019).

There are also emerging images like the Crazy Black Bitch (CBB) and Superwoman that affect Black women in the workplace, especially as they aspire to become leaders (Thomas et al., 2022). The CBB is vindictive, unstable, aggressive, and overly argumentative and will stop at nothing to obtain success but has significant issues with maintaining relationships and loyalty in professional organizations (Leath & Mims, 2021). The Superwoman is an overachieving, independent, strong, and gifted Black woman who is expected to do it all and handle countless work-related tasks without fear or insecurity (Carter-Francique, 2020). These controlling depictions of Black womanhood are essential to consider as they subvert a Black woman's work ethic and commitment to managing and balancing their family and work (Leath & Mims, 2021)

Corporate Leadership

Historically, women were not viewed as leaders, even with the required knowledge and expertise (Lim, 2019). Today, women are becoming more visible in leadership roles (Gamble & Turner, 2015), although they are still underrepresented at the top (Lim, 2019). This is important to note because, as women become more visible, so do their leadership and managerial styles. The leadership styles of men, women, and, more specifically, Black women are different, according to Lim (2019). Although the literature on women's leadership has increased in recent years (Davis & Maldonado, 2015), there is still little research on Black women and their

managerial styles (Gamble & Turner, 2015). Much literature on Black women is impressionistic and anecdotal rather than evidence based (Gamble & Turner, 2015).

Studies describing the difference between male and female leadership styles have been shown to lack replicability (Gamble & Turner, 2015). These studies indicated that female leaders were more sensitive and caring than their male counterparts and suggested that the women were more responsive and democratic (Gamble & Turner, 2015). Similarly, Gamble and Turner (2015) maintained that female leaders are known to be great listeners, lack egos, and have various problem-solving methods. It should be cautioned, however, that theories and studies focused on women's leadership styles do not necessarily apply to Black women and should be reevaluated with respect to Black women in majority White organizations (Davis, 2012). Although leadership theories and most studies have ignored Black women (Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010), a small number of studies have focused on the leadership strategies of African American executives. Furthermore, researchers (Sims & Carter, 2019) have argued that more leadership theory construction should focus on race and gender. This is important, as examining multiple studies revealed that the corporate leadership experience of White women differs from Black women, and that of Black men differs from White and Black women (Davis & Maldonado, 2015; Gamble & Turner, 2015).

Researchers summarizing qualitative, quantitative, and theoretical research concerning Black women and leadership have documented that Black women possess leadership traits identical to those of Anglo men and women and possess behaviors unique to themselves (Sims & Carter, 2019). Black women share with Anglo men traits of self-confidence, independence, and strong influence strategies, and Black women share democratic and transformative traits similar to those of Anglo women (Sims & Carter, 2019). Black women executives demonstrate a few

unique behavioral traits, including independence, assertion, direct communication, autonomy, and self-confidence (Sims & Carter, 2019). Black women leaders are also creative risk takers with both masculine and feminine leadership traits (Sims & Carter, 2019). The next section will explain how stereotypes can impact Black women's career trajectories and the research that has given insight into what Black women do to stand out and not be labeled with negative stereotypes.

Corporate Stereotypes

When leaders are viewed as violating role expectations, job-related stereotypes and biases occur (Hill et al., 2015). Historically, the CEO position has been occupied by White men, which means that non-White men may suffer from the effects of bias (Hill et al., 2015). The few minority individuals who shatter the glass ceiling and obtain leadership positions endure unpleasant and disparate treatment by coworkers (Hill et al., 2015). According to Hill et al. (2015), they are evaluated unfavorably and receive more scrutiny than their White male colleagues. Because White men are prominent in most leadership and management positions, various studies show that role expectations negatively affect ethnic and minority women (Hill et al., 2015). These women appeared unnatural, presumptuous, and less-than-ideal fit for the job (Hill et al., 2015).

The model of a good leader has traditionally been described as masculine (Davis, 2012). The leadership characteristics include being organized, strategic, assertive, and good decision-makers (Davis, 2012). When women exhibited the leadership behaviors of men, which are often required for the job, they were seen as inappropriate and mistaken as another stereotype of inauthenticity (Hill et al., 2015). This was referenced in the 1989 Price Waterhouse v. Hopkins case, which stated that "an employer who objects to aggressiveness in women but whose position

requires this trait places women in an intolerable Catch 22: out of a job if they behave aggressively and out of a job if they do not" (Lindsay, 1994, p. 431). Stereotype threat, an additional concept affecting Black women in the workplace, adds more complexity to organizational interactions (Sims & Carter, 2019). Stereotype threat occurs when an individual exhibits behavior that confirms a negative stereotype aligned with one of the individual's social identities (Sims & Carter, 2019). Arriving late and performing poorly are examples of stereotype threats that reflect an inaccurate assessment simply because of the small number of minorities in leadership positions (Sims & Carter, 2019). With such negative stereotypes perpetrated against Black women, the trajectory to success can be a barrier, impacting their image in U.S. corporate organizations.

Barriers to Success

Qualitative studies that include Black women have shared findings concerning barriers to obtaining top-level status in various industries. A study investigating Black women athletic directors reported themes from face-to-face interviews: stereotypes of race and gender, gender role conflict and occupational stereotyping, career obstacles, scrutiny, and identity conflict (McDowell & Carter-Francique, 2017). The findings from this study negatively affect the well-being of Black women leaders, in addition to recruitment and retention (McDowell & Carter-Francique, 2017). A 2018 study examined the professional experiences of Black women who served in midlevel management careers. Themes from the 25 participants included experiencing race- and gender-based discrimination (Mitchell, 2018). Being the only Black women at the mid-management level, they also revealed overthinking about self-presentation and work/life balance in which the pressures of performance and parenting collided (Mitchell, 2018). These studies shared common themes that confirmed the barriers to success for Black women pursuing

leadership roles in multiple industries. With barriers come strategies for overcoming them, regardless of their sociological and psychological impact. Prior researchers explained and showed the experiences of Black women in U.S corporate organizations and provided insights into the obstacles faced, such as bias based on negative stereotypes, lack of developmental opportunities, and access to upward mobility. The challenges that are faced by Black women not only highlight the inequities within U.S corporate organizations, but they also explain the strategies Black women need to use to navigate in the workplace to present themselves and be seen as a culture fit by leaders. By understanding how Black women negotiate workplace cultures that are not built for their success, this study sheds light on the innovative ways that Black women must present themselves for promotions and visibility. Understanding the underrepresentation of Black women in leadership roles in U.S organizations explains the importance of addressing the issues of implementing policies and programs to foster equitable opportunities to executive leadership opportunities.

Strategies Black Women Use to Negotiate in the Corporate Workplace

The literature has described various coping mechanisms Black women use to aid in leadership development and career ascension. There are no prescriptive strategies for career progression. Rather, literature provides a hodgepodge of tools for advancement. These mechanisms include identity negotiation, sponsorship and mentorship, education, training and leadership development programs, and working harder than peers. Each is described in the following subsections.

Identity Negotiation Strategies

There are various ways to define Black women participating in identity negotiation/shifting. Dickens et al. (2022) described Black career women's identity

negotiation/shifting experiences as living in a bicultural world, where one culture represents Black while the other is White. Hall et al. (2012) defined shifting as "an internal process-a chipping away of the Black woman's sense of self, wholeness, and centeredness. It is invisible and can have devastating effects" (p. 216). Role flexing, a similar term to identity negotiation/shifting, defines changing one's speech, behavior, dress, or presentation to fit in more with a dominant group while seeking to diminish the burden of bias and negative stereotypes (Ross et al., 2021). Code-switching, adjusting between two or more languages, also described Black women's experiences in the workplace as a behavior to use or reject in their career (Dickens & Chavez, 2018).

In the workplace, Black women are most likely to face myths about Black women and may have to use every shifting strategy in their toolbox (Mbilishaka & Apugo, 2020). Black women may be accepted and fulfilled in one world while simultaneously may not be accepted and fulfilled in another (Pei et al., 2021). They reside in a bicultural world that requires shaping their careers with the White world while maintaining their commitment to their Black personal and community life (Ross et al., 2021). This is like being an outsider-within. Black women navigate being an insider in a White environment, such as the workplace, while not fully being accepted due to being minoritized (Page et al., 2022). Facing these myths while residing in a bicultural, outsider-within world may lead Black women to apply identity negotiation/shifting behaviors to cope and survive the workplace.

While some Black women regard identity shifting as imperative to professional and social advancement and success in the workplace (Dickens & Chavez, 2018), others perceive discrimination, oppression, and stereotypes as some of the main reasons Black career women shift. Discrimination against Black women in the workplace comes from stereotypes, excessive

demands, extra demands, lack of mentoring, exclusion from work relationships, being ignored or harassed, and assumptions of incompetence (Hall et al., 2012). Isolation is also a significant experience for Black women who work in predominantly White workplaces (Hall et al., 2012). Thus, Black women who experience stress from discrimination and oppression in the workplace depend on coping strategies to manage stress (Zirulnik & Orbe, 2019). Black women who manage stress shift, walk away, or pray (Hall et al., 2012). These strategies highlight that Black women cope with workplace discrimination by participating in identity shifting (Dickens et al., 2019). Coping strategies, such as shifting, can also resist disempowering racial and gender narratives and assumptions (Lewis et al., 2013). Due to how power interacts with race and gender in creating conflict in the workplace, many minoritized individuals, such as Black women, seek strategies and ways of negotiating their communication. The strategies include direct, indirect, or avoidance communication styles to find their place in dominant culture organizations (Dickens & Chavez, 2018). Unfortunately, these shifts in identity can create various disadvantages to being a Black woman in the workplace.

Shifting one's professional identity is a tool to be taken seriously in professional and social settings (Dickens & Chavez, 2018). Shifting is due to pressures enacted to resist stereotypes, tokenism, and fitting into predominantly White work environments' professional standards. Black women primarily shift their identities to resist Black women stereotypes in the workplace that could negatively alter their career trajectory (Pei et al., 2021). They see it as a tool to resist the stereotypes of being loud and angry, oversexualized, a welfare queen, ghetto, and bougie (Dickens & Chavez, 2018). Stereotypes may also make Black women hyper visible in the workplace and more susceptible to interpersonal discrimination (Dickens et al., 2019). Hypervisibility is relevant for individuals who are susceptible to tokenism in the workplace.

Tokenized women may shift their visibility behavior to avert negative workplace experiences (Dickens et al., 2019). Due to tokenization, many Black women are subject to unnecessary surveillance, such as being under the microscope during work, monitored for stereotypical behaviors, and watching interactions with other Black colleagues (Hall et al., 2012). These challenges ultimately sway Black women to shift to professional standards by assimilating to predominantly White work environments (Dickens & Chavez, 2018). Many Black women act White and feel inauthenticity in their identity (Dickens & Chavez, 2018). Black women in Dickens et al.'s (2022) study internalized role flexing/shifting to a point where they completely assimilated into giving up one's sense of self, specifically in the race, by being ashamed of their Blackness and trying not to act Black. Consequently, Black women face challenges in negotiating their identity to achieve acceptance while resisting stereotypes in the workplace.

While there are various costs associated with Black women's identity negotiation/shifting practices, there are numerous advantages to shifting one's identity in the workplace. Some Black women perceive identity shifting as positive as they hoped to be "the model Black citizen" to represent their Black family well and leave a positive legacy for future Black women in professional environments (Dickens & Chavez, 2018, p. 769). Career-oriented Black women grow to use their place in the workforce to create new images of Black womanhood, causing racist and sexist images and barriers to weaken (Bell, 1990). One primary example is how Black women shift their speech patterns to combat stereotypes in the workplace. Black women acknowledged shifting speech patterns to combat stereotypical beliefs from their supervisors and colleagues (Hall et al., 2012). They also use role flexing/shifting to " prove them wrong" by justifying themselves by highlighting their strengths and disproving stereotypes by speaking better or hiding their true feelings, such as anger in the workplace (Shorter-Gooden 2004, p.

418). Through this lens, some Black women view shifting as an asset and a coping mechanism for their workplace survival. Shorter-Gooden (2004) defined role flexing/shifting as an adaptive survival mechanism when there is no option to fix or untangle discrimination in the workplace. Also, biculturality is an asset that causes divergent thinking, creativity, risk-taking, and boundary spanning among Black women (Zirulnik & Orbe, 2019).

The advantages and disadvantages of identity negotiation/shifting present various contradictions and mixed feelings for Black women in the workplace. Black women live in the tension of a bicultural world; hence, they experience contradictive conflicts in their identity, career, and various cultural and societal contexts (Bell, 1990). Many feel that their mixed feelings from identity shifting resulted from the necessity to navigate various cultural environments while concurrently experiencing and being aware of the anxiety and frustrating emotions that come with consistently participating in identity-shifting behaviors (Dickens & Chavez, 2018). Shifting has caused some Black women to respond to stereotypical expectations rather than confirm their essential status as members of their organizations (Zirulnik & Orbe, 2019). While some Black women feel that shifting their language and behaviors are not intentional but represented a multifaceted characteristic of their Black womanhood, they still alter their languages and behaviors in a professional environment. Many feel they could not be themselves (Dickens & Chavez, 2018). The changes in behaviors have ultimately caused some Black women to view work as a place of alienation due to constant shifting (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2004). Others have chosen other aspects of their identities to explain challenges in the workplace. Some Black women executives in predominantly White workplaces decide to negotiate their race and gendered identity and interactions through what would make sense for them. Therefore, the contradictions and mixed feelings of identity negotiation/shifting illustrate

the challenges Black women experience in the workplace. In the next section, I review the importance of sponsorships and mentorship programs in the workplace, and how it benefits Black women as they work toward attaining executive leadership roles in U.S corporations.

Sponsorship and Mentorship

Because White males occupy many executive positions and provide Black women access to the opportunities given to them, Black women can benefit from their mentorship and sponsorship (Davis, 2012). There is a difference between a mentor and a sponsor. A mentor gives advice and guidance and helps one through problem solving (Davis, 2012). On the other hand, a sponsor goes to bat for a candidate by advocating behind closed doors in a way that a mentor cannot (Davis, 2012). Mentors offer career and psychosocial support to minority leaders (Chanland & Murphy, 2018). These individuals also provide visibility, coaching, inspiration, and motivation, which can help employees reach higher levels in the organization (Chanland & Murphy, 2018). Thirty percent of Black women report having access to senior leaders at work versus 40% of White women, according to CTI's (2019) corporate race study. Forging relationships with top-line executives is more difficult for Black women, which results in frustration with organizational advancement (CTI, 2019). These statistics justify successful Black leaders' call for mentorship to young people (Lewis, 2015). This helps build an early corporate leadership pipeline (Lewis, 2015). With access to mentorship and sponsors from other tenured leaders, Black women can thrive and be given opportunities for professional development to increase their chances of attaining executive leadership roles in U.S corporations. In the next section, I review how professional development programs can help Black women get prepared for executive leadership roles, and the benefits they get to experience when given this opportunity.

Education, Training, and Leadership Development Programs

Reaching an educational level that suits the desired upper-level positions is imperative for Black women to be considered for these positions. In one study, participants believed earning a doctorate was needed to move their careers forward (Mitchell, 2018). Although an increase in African Americans receiving doctorates in the United States exists (787 in 1987 versus 1,869 in 2004), there was a 10% decline in 2005 and a further 2% decline in 2006 (Gamble & Turner, 2015). In 2007, 1,821 African Americans received doctoral degrees (Gamble & Turner, 2015). Beyond degree education, participants from multiple studies stated the need for professional skill-based training (Gamble & Turner, 2015). Training on specific skills is needed to prepare Black women for career success while giving them the qualifications they need to be valuable and effective (Gamble & Turner, 2015). In one study that examined the underrepresentation of African American college administrators, the researcher stated that professional preparation is rare for assistant and associate deans pursuing administrative work (Campbell, 2018). Further education was suggested for mid-level college administrations, which included budgeting and personnel management (Campbell, 2018). Without proper training, Black women are not seen as capable for leadership roles in the workplace and must try twice as hard to showcase their skills and abilities. In the next section, I review how Black women have expressed frustration, finding that they must work twice as hard as their peers for recognition or upward mobility to executive leadership roles.

Working Harder than Peers

Black women often need to work harder than their peers to ascend in their careers. A study by Davis (2012) included Black women executives in academia and business. One participant noted a need to work harder than everyone else in her cabinet (Davis, 2012). In a

peer-reviewed article on the underrepresentation of Black women executives, the authors cited work from other studies that validated both the rise in expectations and the need for Black women to exceed expectations compared to their female peers (Beckwith et al., 2016). A study of female Black midlevel managers revealed the frequent need to meet higher standards (Mitchell, 2018). This was related to a participant who confessed that her White male boss had higher expectations of her when she took time off from work compared to his expectations of her White coworkers (Mitchell, 2018). The need to work harder than peers is also reflected in CTI's corporate racial study citing that 69% of Black women professionals feel like they have to work harder to advance versus 16% of White women (CTI, 2019). The depiction of Black women's perceptions and experiences in the corporate setting confirms why a Black feminist lens is necessary when studying Black women in majority White organizations. The complexity surrounds their identity—gender, race, and socioeconomic class (Sims & Carter, 2019). Intersectionality, largely studied in academia, shows race and gender as important for Black women college professors who linked this to their Black cultural identity (Sims & Carter, 2019).

Conclusion

The combination of racial and gender discrimination against Black women is based on a deep-rooted historical bias (Powell, 2019). The literature demonstrates evidence of the many barriers Black women faced when participating in the nation's civil and equal rights movement. The events of these earlier periods experienced by Black women shape individuals' perceptions of themselves, their value, and their emotional significance. Workplace experiences can be both positive and discouraging. There are numerous accounts where Black women reported seeing employees who looked different than themselves advancing more rapidly with fewer credentials and experience (Brown et al., 2010). Edwards (2015) reported that Black women are even

vulnerable to systemic injustice outside corporate America. For example, Black women made up only 2.9% of all university faculty in the United States due to disproportionate hiring (Haskins et al., 2016). The literature also notes the historical exclusion of Black women from the social work (Barretti, 2015). Social injustice can be seen in multiple workplaces, which calls for studying intersectionality in various industries (Edwards, 2015). This study answers that call by studying the coping mechanism that Black women use in corporations.

The literature has described various coping mechanisms Black women use to aid in leadership development and career ascension. There are no prescriptive strategies for career progression. Rather, literature provides a hodgepodge of tools for advancement. These mechanisms include identity negotiation, sponsorship and mentorship, education, training and leadership development programs, and working harder than peers. The study will serve as a model for other Black women seeking advancement into leadership positions, give insight into issues in the workplace that are often ignored, elevate the voices and experiences of Black women in corporate businesses, and add research to the Human Resources Development industry. Understanding Black women's experiences in U.S corporate workspaces is critical because it emphasizes the organizational, built-in barriers and biases that block upward mobility in the workplace, or any professional growth opportunities. The experiences that Black women have gone through not only shows the root cause of the underrepresentation in executive roles in U.S organizations but also explains the strategies that can be implemented to provide equal opportunities in the workplace.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Population

The population of interest was Black female executive leaders in US corporate businesses. The study used purposive sampling to focus on participants whose lives aligned with the phenomenon under study (Wertz, 2005). According to Wertz (2005), the lives of human beings should be integrated with the topic's subject matters. While there is no right answer to the question of the appropriate number of participants for a sample, the primary concern for the researcher is the ability to obtain a detailed account of the experiences of the participant (Vagle, 2014).

Sampling Strategy and Criteria

A semistructured interview with open-ended questions to probe for details related to each experience was used. As a professional, giving presentations to the management team and conducting interviews to fill positions is a routine and was beneficial to prepare me for data collection. In qualitative research, the researcher's role is to collect data, provide a voice for the participants, and evaluate the data to provide informed commentary (Xu & Storr, 2012). The research study showed the essence of Black female experiences in pursuing higher-level executive roles. The study's sampling procedures were as follows:

1. An email was sent to potential participants explaining the purpose of my study, a projected time of how long their participation will be needed, an estimated date of when the study will be completed, expectations on their end and mine as the researcher, and how the study will be shared.

2. If participants responded to confirm their participation, the Informed Consent form was sent via email to complete, which included a statement that their LinkedIn profile will be used to help with asking questions per their current and prior leadership roles. If participants did not want to provide a resume which has more of their career background than what they have on LinkedIn this will also be accepted.
3. If the participants responded that they had no interest, the survey displayed a message thanking her for her interest.
4. I sent a follow-up email to the participants after one week if the consent form was not received. Once the participant returned the signed consent form via email, I scheduled the conference call on the platform Microsoft Teams, sent an email reminding them of what to expect during our call, and how long the scheduled call was going to take.
5. After the interview, the participant received an email thanking them for their contributions to the study, along with a timeframe of when to expect the transcripts from the call.

Recruitment

To be an eligible participant in this research, each person had to have held an executive leadership role and identify themselves as a Black woman. I recruited participants by reaching out to professional women I knew and then used LinkedIn, a social networking site, to reach out to other Black professional women in corporate U.S. organizations. Four of the participants in my research were women that I have worked with professionally, and the other two were women that I had never encountered but were reached through LinkedIn.

I reached out to all participants by e-mail and phone and explained that the focus of my research study was to hear their lived experiences in executive leadership roles, focusing on the intersectionality of race, gender, and leadership within US corporate businesses. Interviews were scheduled according to the availability of my participants. The criteria questionnaire was e-mailed to the participants who met the criteria of the study to fill out and return through e-mail. After receiving the completed criteria questionnaire, the informed consent and interview scheduling forms were e-mailed to each participant to be completed and returned to me by email. To conceal the identities and ensure the privacy of the participants, I assigned all participants a pseudonym for data collected. The codes used were represented as labels on all documentation received from the participants to engage in this research study. Below are the characteristics of my participants gathered.

Table 1

Participant Characteristics

Participant Code	Job Title	Age	Years in Executive Position	Education Level
PCM01	Vice President of Benefits	41-50	11	Bachelors
PKW02	Human Resources Executive	41-50	4	Masters
PKC03	Strategic Customer Success Executive	41-50	12	Masters
PCA04	Client Relations Executive	31-41	3	Doctoral
PSC05	Client Relations Executive	31-41	8	Masters
PKT06	Senior Director, Client Executive	41-50	9	Bachelors

Data Collection

Data collection began on July 12, 2024, after the Colorado State University IRB approval on June 6, 2024. The interviews were conducted starting July 6, 2024, and concluded August 12, 2024. The objective was to complete all interviews by August 30, 2024, allowing sufficient time to review the recordings multiple times, accurately document thoughts, and ensure the transcripts matched the recordings without discrepancies. During the interview, only four participants agreed to be on camera. Those who declined felt more comfortable expressing their emotions and experiences without exposing their vulnerability. To ensure participants felt comfortable, I made it a goal to build a rapport with them. I started my sessions with giving them insight into who I was as a student and a professional. I also asked questions about how they felt about the interview so they were encouraged to speak up about any boundaries they had and I could create open dialogue during the session. Sharing my "why" behind the research allowed participants to understand they had a safe platform to speak in, and my commitment to having their voices and experiences shared for the next generation of executive Black female leaders coming into U.S corporate businesses.

Table 2 presents the interview log for my research, detailing the pseudonyms assigned to each participant, their preferred recording style (camera on or audio only), as well as the duration of each call.

Table 2

Semi Structured Schedule Interview Log

Participant Code	Date of Interview	Permission to Record	Audio or Video Recording	Start Time	End Time	Duration (in minutes)
PCM01	11-Jul-24	Yes	Both	5:00PM EST	6:06PM EST	66 minutes
PKW02	26-Jul-24	Yes	Both	4:00PM EST	5:13PM EST	73 minutes
PKC03	27-Jul-24	Yes	Both	12:00PM EST	1:21PM EST	81 minutes
PCA04	31-Jul-24	Yes	Audio	4:00PM EST	5:25PM EST	85 minutes
PSC05	8-Aug-24	Yes	Both	5:00PM EST	730PM EST	146 minutes
PKT06	12-Aug-25	Yes	Audio	7:00PM EST	8:10PM EST	70 minutes

After each session, I documented my reflections and considered my perspective as a professional Black woman in corporate America. Holding a mid-senior leadership role, my positionality brought valuable insights to the interviews but also required a thorough reflexive approach to ensure that my study genuinely reflected the experiences of my participants. By acknowledging and recording my positionality in my journal, I was able to contribute to a more transparent, equitable, and impactful body of research. After the interviews, I took a short break before listening to the recordings twice, to ensure that each interview was properly transcribed. I also reached out to each participant thanking them for their time, and if they had any other thoughts that they wanted to share. All participants felt they had sufficient time to express their thoughts and emotions during our interview sessions.

To protect the data, all transcribed interviews were stored on a personal computer in an encrypted file form accessible only with a specific code. Additionally, a USB drive was used as a backup.

Data Analysis

The analysis followed Smith et al.'s, (2009) six steps for interpretative phenomenological data collection to answer my research question.

For Step 1, I read and rereading the transcript several times to immerse myself in the data. To add to the immersion into the data, Pietkiewicz and Smith (2014) suggested that the researcher listen to the audio recording to gain insights into tone and emotion. These researchers also suggested making notes during each reading and listening and recording insights and observations (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Once I read and reread the transcript, the next step was to examine the transcript for content and language on an exploratory level. During this step, I made notes and comments which allowed me to begin to understand the participant's points of view. Smith et al. (2009) described three distinct processes used for the exploratory phase: descriptive comments, linguistic comments, and conceptual comments. Descriptive comments focus on describing the content of what the participant had said in terms of words, phrases, or explanations (Smith et al., 2009).

The next phase was noting linguistic issues like the use of pronouns, pauses, laughter, and the use of metaphors (Smith et al., 2009; Vagle, 2014). Conceptual comments are interpretative, and the analysis shifts to more of an overarching understanding of the phenomenon that participants are describing (Smith et al., 2009). After transcription and member checking, I began coding interviews. Coding refers to the process of identifying topics, issues, similarities, and differences revealed in interviews (Sutton & Austin, 2015). The coding process can be done either by hand on a hard copy of the transcript, by highlighting and using the comment function on an electronic version, or by using a qualitative software package (Sutton & Austin, 2015).

From here, I coded key segments of data with a descriptive statement for each case, which aligns to the approach as outlined by Smith et al. (2009) for Steps 1 and 2. This approach of analysis for cases in interpretative phenomenology involves the analysis of each case independently before moving to the next case. I identified codes for each case after reading the transcriptions and reviewing my comments (Smith et al., 2009).

From the identification of codes in Step 2, I began to review the initial codes in each case to group similar meaning codes from individual cases into emerging themes. The goal for this step of the analysis was to reduce the data into meaningful groups or emerging theme codes while maintaining the integrity of the meaning and complexity of mapping interrelationships and connections. The challenge at this stage was to develop a succinct and insightful statement of emergent themes. According to Smith et al. (2009), there are two basic ways to discover themes. One is to list all themes in chronological order by moving them around to form clusters. The other approach suggests examining all the themes and grouping them based on similarities and differences between them.

In interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA), the researcher reviews each case or participant separately before looking for themes across cases or participants (Smith et al., 2009). My approach was to bracket my ideas from the analysis of the previous case while working on the next one to review trends and compare participants' responses. The last step involved looking for patterns or themes across cases by identifying recurrent themes across cases. This step involved relabeling or reconfiguring the themes and included finding superordinate themes and subthemes.

The tool that I used was inductive thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is a method for analyzing qualitative data that can help identify patterns and concepts. It is often used to analyze

interview transcripts. Thematic analysis is beneficial when working with large amounts of data, as it allows researchers to divide and categorize the data in a way that's easier to process. It is also useful for finding subjective information like opinions and experiences in interviews, surveys, or conversations (Naeem et al., 2023).

While reviewing prior literature in comparison to the theoretical and conceptual frameworks for this research, focusing on the underrepresentation of Black female executives in leadership roles in U.S. corporations, thematic patterns such as emotional impact, organizational culture, implicit bias, mentorship relationships, microaggressions and strategies to support Black female executives began to emerge. These themes, when applied to the study, allowed me to ask questions that focused on how experiences of implicit bias make participants feel, the journey of their development, the professional development programs they were a part of, if any, and the strategies they used to cope with the stress they experienced, if applicable.

Since my study used a social science approach, new trends emerged due to the different industries and positions my participants described. With the new themes that emerged, my goal was to not only reinforce the themes with vivid excerpts of what participants highlighted and ensure they were properly coded, but also to research additional literature to help me build upon my conceptual framework. The themes found in the study allowed me to present new concepts to the human resource development industry and provided me with new ideas and perspectives to develop new initiatives behind diversity, equity, and inclusion. Above all, these new themes allowed me to expand on the different experiences my participants have faced as Black female executives in leadership roles in corporate U.S. businesses. Table 3 presents the themes that emerged during the study, and the number of times each was discussed by participants. This

shows the consistency among all my participants and their experiences in U.S corporations as Black female executives.

Table 3

Concept Word Code Counts

Concept Label	Code Counts
Workplace Culture	51
Stereotype Issues	30
Resilience	41
Marginalization	45
Journeys and Pathway	40
Intersectionality in Appearance	19
Intersectional	36
Imposter Syndrome	19
Faith	17
Emotionality	11
Community and Relationships	45
Black Mentorship	43
Assimilation	20

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

Using semistructured interviews with open-ended questions and documenting observations post-interview, four major themes were identified regarding the barriers faced by Black women in executive roles pertaining to their leadership development and advancement. Once I completed the interviews with my six participants, I used the data to compare responses with each participant which identified multiple concepts that were categorized into four themes. In Table 4, I capture the topics which are highlighted, list the subthemes found, and provide one sentence description of each concept found in my study.

Table 4

Themes and Subthemes among Participants

Title	Description
Building & Maintaining Community	All participants expressed the significance of engaging in supportive professional networks that support Black professional women.
Black Mentorship	Women spoke about how they were mentored by black and non'-'black leaders and how this had an impact on their careers. Each participant spoke about how they mentor other black students as well.
Community and Relationships	Participants spoke about their partnerships in church, women groups with other black women, and spoke about their safe net they found in the workplace.
Maintaining Well-Being	Each participant mentioned maintaining their well'-'being through their Christian faith, prayer, and meditation to navigate challenges and achieve inner peace.
Faith	Participants all stated that faith has been a great tool to help them overcome resilience, and the issues they've faced in the workplace.

(table continues)

Resilience	Resilience in the workplace for participants meant the ability to thrive in the face of adversity while also acknowledging the toll of constant resilience. These participants were aware of the workplace culture but had developed strengths in how to overcome.
Surviving Aggressions, Exclusions, and Stereotypes	All participants spoke about surviving aggressions, exclusions, and stereotypes by refining resilience through self'-'advocacy, and community support from other professionals.
Emotionality	Participants spoke about how they were expected to control, modify and suppress emotions in ways that their white counterparts, are not.
Intersectional	The ways gender and race are aligned with one another.
Journeys and Pathway	This is where women explain their career journey to be executive leaders.
Marginalization	Participants gave insight into experiences on they have been heavily impacted by bias in hiring and promotions.
Stereotype Issues	Participants spoke about the negative stereotypes from the media about black women and the serious disadvantages it puts them in the workplace.
Workplace Culture	All participants believed that leadership could create a safe environment by actions and not mission statements.
Tensions of Authentic Selves vs. Assimilation	Participants gave examples of how daily they found themselves, trying to navigate the tension between being their authentic selves and assimilating into workplace cultures.
Assimilation	This is where women explained how they had to change certain aspects of their identity to become like their white counterparts.
Imposter Syndrome	My participants had persistent self-doubt and the inability to believe that one's success is deserved, despite evidence of competence.
Intersectionality in Appearance	Participants stated that they felt like they had to wear their hair straight to be seen as professional, speak in a certain tone and manner, and appear to be approachable as often they were seen as 'intimidating.'

As I listened to the recordings, I was also able to capture the number of times each concept was talked about, which showed the benefits of creating a better workplace culture that promotes diversity and inclusion of Black women, attaining and retaining their executive leadership roles in U.S business corporations.

The four major themes from the open-ended, semistructured interviews were:

1. Building and Maintaining Community

All participants expressed the significance of engaging in professional networks that support Black professional women. In these networking groups, participants discussed workplace issues that negatively impacted them with others who had similar experiences and received advice on strategies to move forward. During the interviews, each participant stated that the networking groups they participated in not only provided social benefits but also fostered camaraderie. These groups helped the women recognize that their issues were common and part of a broader systemic problem.

2. Maintaining Well-Being through Faith

Each participant mentioned maintaining their well-being through their Christian faith, prayer, and meditation to navigate challenges and achieve inner peace. To participants, faith was a roadmap that offered consolation during times of distress. Prayer and meditation were described as critical tools to help them with mental clarity, and emotional stability. These practices helped reinforce participants' identity and purpose, enabling them to persevere despite systematic barriers.

3. Surviving Aggressions, Exclusions, and Stereotypes

During interview sessions, participants spoke about surviving aggressions, exclusions, and stereotypes by refining resilience through self-advocacy, community support from other

professionals in their organization, and focusing on their goals despite systemic challenges in the workplace. Mentorship with experienced professionals in their organization provided participants with valuable insights and guidance. Participants stated that with their mentors', who were usually senior leaders, understanding of the organizational culture, they were aided in navigating the complexities presented. Each participant stated their ideal mentor was someone who was receptive to their concerns, empathetic, and demonstrated an understanding of their experiences regardless of their race or gender.

4. Tensions of Authentic Selves versus Assimilation

Participants gave examples of how daily they found themselves, trying to navigate the tension between being their authentic selves and assimilating into workplace cultures. They described how they expressed themselves and how they became strategic in conformity to their professional workplace norms. Examples of this ranged from deciding how to wear their natural hair, which has often been seen as unprofessional in the workplace to wearing their hair straight which has been seen as more professional in White spaces, how they communicate, dress codes, and even their mannerisms to ensure they avoid being seen as 'too different' from their White counterparts. This constant balancing act created internal struggles to maintain their 'Black' identity while also wanting to project a professional image that aligned with the expectations of their organizations 'cultural fit.' The participants expressed frustrations with the pressure to conform, which resulted in feelings of isolation as they always felt a struggle to express their true selves.

I expand on each of these four themes with examples and participant quotes below. After many of the longer participant quotes, I also include my own observations and reactions as a Black businesswoman which were captured in my reflexive researcher journal.

Building and Maintaining Community

During interview sessions, I found that all my participants mentioned the belief in maintaining and building relationships with other professionals in the workplace, especially with other Black professionals. Participants believed that networking in their workplace was key to their success, but difficult to attain. Many spoke about the lack of opportunities given to them to have conversations with upper leadership or even given a platform to showcase their knowledge of the business. For example, rather than having the opportunity to present their ideas to upper leadership, they felt forced to provide their thoughts to other counterparts who were White, who later took credit and received promotions. This was an occurrence that happened to all participants. As each participant spoke about their experience, they stated that trust has been difficult to build with their counterparts. With this as a consistent theme, participants described the need to develop mentorship and coaching relationships to navigate through these occurrences and learn how to advocate for themselves.

When asked about how mentorship has played a role in their success as leaders, participants believed that Black mentorship is critical because it provides a unique understanding of the challenges faced by Black professionals. In addition, participants stated that mentorship has offered them guidance on navigating systemic racism in the workplace culture, helped them build a sense of belonging in the workplace, and provided a supportive network with a role model who can relate to their experiences, which helped them to greater career advancement and leadership opportunities. Due to the lack of Black mentorship and representation in the workplace, participants often saw high turnover among Black professionals. They believed Black mentorship can help bridge the gap and create a more inclusive workplace culture.

In response to this question, participant PKC stated:

Finding people and mentors who see you from different perspectives can help you grow, because they can also share some insight that another person may not see. A key for a mentor is not to critique, but to help guide you. They are there to help you aspire to get somewhere. So always make sure that your mentor relationships or people that you respect have things that they can provide to help you grow. Because if not, then it's on you. I have three or four mentor mentees now, and I found that the same thing that my mentor gave me, I've given to them. I have a young lady that I've been mentoring for a while, who is in the same profession as I am. Most of our conversations were about helping her grow in her profession, and one day she disappeared for like a month. I said, what's going on? I haven't heard from you. You know you missed a couple of meetings, and she told me that she almost had a nervous breakdown because of a lot of the race issues that were going on with her job, which we have never talked about. She said, well, PKC you are my mentor. I just didn't think that was a part of our relationship that you wanted to help me with. I said, well, that was my fault because I should have been more attuned to other challenges that may have been impacting you, not just the mechanics of your job. Since then, I make sure my mentors have a platform to feel comfortable to have 'the talk' with me. Sad reality and many do not know how to even react to the implicit bias they experience. During this conversation, I noticed my participant's disappointment when she stated that her mentee was facing the same challenges, she had encountered upon entering the workforce.

- The participant expressed regret and repeatedly emphasized how such conversations should have been initiated earlier. To my participant she felt as if she did not equip her mentee with the critical tools for navigating these

experiences. After describing this experience she had with her mentee, my participant remained silent for approximately 30 seconds, visibly disheartened. When I asked if she was okay, she requested to proceed with the interview, and did not respond to my question.

This was followed by participant, PCA stating:

> I think what I notice with other Black professionals who I mentor is the confidence level is not as high as I'd like it to be. With lack of representation, there is no image or name of someone that looks them to relate to.

- Participant PCA statements, highlighted the systemic issues that have impacted the confidence and professional growth for Black women in the workplace since they entered the workforce. The participant emphasized the importance of fostering mentorship relationships that not only focus on the technical aspects of how to be successful in one's role, but the emotional and psychological support that is needed to help build confidence and resilience. This means compliments, reassurance statements, and feedback to help the mentees feel confident in themselves, and that they too are capable.

PKT added:

> I find joy in mentoring. I thrive. I learn from whoever I mentor; I learn from them just as much as they learn from me. I think if I didn't have the opportunity to mentor, give back by sharing, or help develop other people, it would probably choke the life out of me. I just can't imagine life without giving back, and this is not only at work, but even at church and my sorority community events. I just enjoy mentoring, listening, and

coaching others. I think that's the spiritual gift of mine, and feel like when I don't exercise it, then I'm not in line with who God designed me to be. That's just who I am.

I think that's probably why I'm more, maybe more passionate about my mentor relationships because I want everyone that I mentor to really have a safe space with me and be able to express themselves without judgment, because you gotta have that, you gotta have that safe space.

- When participant PKT was speaking, I noticed the excitement and enthusiasm in her voice. She had moments of laughing as she recalls her relationships with her mentees, and how she has also grown from these conversations. As I listened to the participants, calming voice, it was evident that mentorship was critical to her, and that she made it her duty to be that haven for mentee's within the workforce and her community.

PSC then concluded stating:

I love mentoring women, particularly Black women, because I understand the struggle. We don't have a lot of people that want to raise their hand, and mentor us if we don't look like them. It's not a statement but a fact. I understand the circumstances, the dynamics, the cultural differences, and the pain it brings.

- When the participant stated, "I love mentoring women, particularly Black women, because I understand the struggle. I noticed the smile she had, the sense of empathy, and enthusiasm in her voice. After this statement, the participant took a moment of reflection as she paused, possibly recalling her own experiences. She smiled and just nodded her head as she expressed her enthusiasm to mentor others, and specifically Black women. I did not see this as just a statement from

the participant, but a testament to her journey and the resilience she tries to foster in others.

Maintaining Well-Being

When it came to finding ways to overcome marginalization and taking care of mental health, all participants alluded to their faith in Christianity and being resilient. Participants stated that faith helped them personally. Faith contributes every day to their professional lives and careers by giving them strength to face all the things they cannot control, such as lack of opportunities, discrimination, and disappointment. Participants stated that faith and meditating with God helps them face challenges presented to them to achieve their professional goals. These participants saw obstacles as a way for their faith to be and in addition to being a tool to help them emotionally and mentally. For example, rather than being upset about being passed over for promotions or projects, participants saw these as opportunities not being meant for them, which they were able to move past.

Participants saw a strong correlation between their faith and their professional pursuits and believed that God and prayer brought changes on a personal level and produced behaviors that they believe will bring assure success in life. In the workplace, participants stated that they did not work directly for their leader, but for the purpose of how God will expect them to carry themselves.

Participant PKW stated:

> I'll be honest and I’m sure many will say the same, that faith has kept me uplifted. Faith has shown me that patience is a virtue and there is always better to come.

- While participant PKW spoke, I noticed how genuine and sincere her voice was, which expressed the depth of her belief. She spoke with a calm temperament,

while nodding her head appearing to reflect to herself, suggesting that faith was indeed a solid foundation in her life. The participants' words and facial expression showed how faith had been a guiding light through challenging times, and throughout the interview this was the theme.

Participant PKW added:

> You are already at Ground Zero as a Black woman, so from the bottom the only way there is up, and if they're going to say no, let them tell you don't tell yourself. We as Black women do this a lot. We tell ourselves no before even taking this chance because history has always told us it's impossible.

- Participant PCM's statement reflects a profound resilience and determination that has not always been rooted in the experiences of Black women. Her assertion that "you are already at Ground Zero as a Black woman" highlights the inherent strength in rising above adversity. As she spoke, she shrugged her shoulders, and stated, 'The worst that can happen is a no."

Participant PKT stated:

> I don't work for my current leader. I work for a higher power, so everything that I do is I do it as if I'm working for him. He did not always get the praise glorified or pat on the back, but he made a difference, and he continues to make the difference in my life. It may not make sense to some people, but it has kept me grounded and humbled.

- As the participant made this statement, she smiled, and I can tell her voice was filled with inspiration. From volunteering to being in the workforce, she carried herself in a manner as if working directly for God.

Participant PCM stated:

God has been pouring into me my whole career and my whole life.

- As Participant PCM spoke the words, "God has been pouring into me my whole career and my whole life," her demeanor was calming, and she expressed a sense of gratitude fulfillment. She put her hands together as a prayer symbol, and chuckled. She spoke with a gentle voice, eyes slightly closed as if visualizing the blessings she had received. Her posture was relaxed but poised, embodying the serenity and strength that faith had instilled in her.

Participant PCM stated:

Let your light shine. Don't let anyone dim your light if you are in a space where they're trying to dim your light, find another room. Leave that room. If you decide to leave that room, go out the front door, never through the back, and don't climb through nobody's window. You need to walk in and walk out the same way you came in, right? And you better do it with your head held high.

- Participant PCM was bright and spoke out loud as she made this statement. As she spoke, she pointed at me and smiled, and I could not help but nod my head in agreeance of her statement. During this interaction, there was a strong sense of connection, like receiving guidance from a seasoned executive on recognizing my worth as an emerging Black professional in the workforce.

Participant PKC stated:

I'm a Christian, so I believe in the power of prayer. I believe in God, and I know that you know. And that's why I always say, when your faith is tested, it's because your faith is not where it should be. So, for me it's stepping back and saying what is mine to control and what is mine to give to God? From here it is saying I'm just going to have to be obedient

because I cannot fix it, and I need to listen and I'm going to have the patience of faith. And so that is what keeps me going, you know, having faith.

- As Participant PKC expressed her gratitude for her faith in God, she spoke with calmness. As she spoke her hands were clasped gently in front of her chest, and she slightly closed her eyes. The participants' sincerity showed her belief is what has kept her grounded, even when she had moments of doubt in her mind.

Participant PSC stated:

I sat in the parking lot of the clinic one day and I just prayed, and I prayed, and I prayed. And I said, Lord, would you have me medicated to function to work for somebody else? I know what I heard clearly so I went home to my husband, and I said I can't do this. This is not the will of God. I am done and he's like, do what you gotta do. I support you. This was before the kids and all the other responsibilities that come with that. We were at a place where, you know, I could do that, but the very next day, I quit. I did not have a plan B; I did not have any prospects lined up at all. I didn't know what was going to happen, but I knew I didn't need that and so I when I put that resignation letter on my boss's desk, it felt like an elephant had just been removed off my shoulders, and even though I had no idea what my next thing was gonna be and where my next check was gonna come from, I just knew that is what I needed to do in that moment for me.

- As participant PSC spoke, her tone elevated and became very expressive with her hand gestures. She became emotional as she expressed the depression and frustration that led to her decision to resign. However, when she spoke about submitting her resignation, she breathed a sigh of relief and began to laugh while describing her departure from the building she worked at. This showed that with

resilience participant PSC was able to stand up for her own mental health, and maintaining her faith that God had something better for her.

Surviving Aggressions, Exclusions, and Stereotypes

During the interview sessions, all participants spoke about the tension between being their authentic selves while assimilating to the dominant culture in their workplace. Participants stated that assimilating and being authentic to themselves at times created conflict between expressing their identity and feeling the need to conform to the dominant culture or social norms, which often led to a struggle to balance their personal values with the desire to fit in. This in turn, potentially caused some internal conflict and a sense of inauthenticity when they felt that they were sacrificing aspects of their true self to assimilate.

Participant PKW stated:

> We see that role we want, and we say, well, we're not gonna hired or I refuse to be that diversity hire. Who am I to them? I don't meet all the qualifications, so I can't do that. And so, when we don't try, things stay still. And again, it's not going to be like, oh, you tried once and that's it. We must continue to try and even when you say you're that diversity hire, will you become that diversity hire but show them what you as that hire bring to the table? And if I ask myself, if I was not there, what would you miss? What would you lose if I left the organization? It is a great feeling. My regional vice president asked me what will she do without me? That's what you want when you're not in the room when you know you're not gonna be around someone missing you. So to take that as diversity hire and don't be afraid to apply.
>
> You are already at Ground Zero as a Black female, so from the bottom the only way there is up, and if they're going to say no, let them tell you don't tell yourself.

I always make sure that I've gone in my persona and my presence. I said I will refuse to be considered the angry Black one. You will not see me lose my temper. You will not see me curse you. You will not see me rolling my eyes and saying disparaging things. I'm gonna be the, the consummate professional always.

- As Participant PKW spoke, her voice carried the confidence of someone who has experience facing adversity in the workplace, refusing to be pigeonholed by negative stereotypes of Black women. Even in the face of implicit bias, and name calling she has experienced, PKW showcased her strength and resilience by maintaining her professionalism and explaining tactics she used to overcome. Her narrative was a great reminder of the impact that being authentic can have in changing perspectives and creating meaningful change.

Participant PKC stated:

I think finding that healthy environment is key. I know Black women know this. It doesn't necessarily mean that everybody looks like you but finding an environment where you and some of it is what brings you peace is the key. I would tell you that the last 10 years have been so difficult that I have come very angry, you know, and I think coming to terms with that and saying, well, I don't wanna be the person that I don't wanna be around. And so, making sure that we're bringing our best and bringing that to the environment, which helped us stop being apologetic, but also leveraging that energy, right. And finding that environment where I know I thrive is where people have the expectation of my excellence

I'm usually the only Black person there and I can say there's almost every day where I must tell people, no, I'm not here to take notes or it'll be even if I'm here to lead the meeting.

- As participant PKC shared her thoughts on the importance of finding a healthy work environment, her disposition reflected her frustration. As a researcher, it was great to catch the raw emotion of a participant as they reflected on the implicit bias they have dealt over the years, and witnessing the impact it can have on someone. PKC's voice carried the weight of her experiences, highlighting the anger and resentment built up over the last decade. Her narrative was proof that resilience is a necessity to maintain authenticity and professionalism while navigating a predominantly non-Black environment.

Participant PSC stated*:*

One, I do think that systemic racism is a big factor. Also, I think systemic sexism is a big factor, so it's compounded, right? Because we're Black. Female.

- Participant PSC's statement the complexity that Black women in American business organizations face, with the compound of racism and sexism. Participant PSC words resonate with the combined experiences of many Black women, including all my participants striving to break free from these institutional barriers.

Participant PCA stated:

That environment or that foundation, that infrastructure is, is an obstacle because there's no one there that looks like me. There are others who might be of another ethnic identity, but in leadership there's not a Black woman there. In our business unit, for our HR teams

across the nation I am the only Black executive. Wow, I just thought about this. And so at this point now in terms of where will I go next, that's the biggest obstacle because you know it's how do you break that glass ceiling, that proverbial glass ceiling, if you will. That's why it's 1% of Black women who are executives. It is because we've been marginalized, the obstacles are so you know large that you know sometimes with all the other things that we must multitask and do, we don't have the time and energy once we've experienced that hurt that trauma, we have triggers, you know, as a result of that.

- While participant PCA spoke, her facial expression revealed the realization that she is the only Black executive in her space for the region. After this realization, she paused and then continued with her reflection. The absence of Black women in executive roles was a reminder of systemic barriers that can exist without realization. Participant PCM's narrative explained the emotional and psychological toll navigating spaces where representation is sparse can do to professional Black woman that aspires to go into an executive role.

Tensions of Authentic Selves Versus Assimilation

All participants expressed their frustrations about the tension they felt between being their authentic selves and assimilating to their organization's culture. To navigate their organization's corporate culture, they expressed how they alter their appearances, the tone they use to their workers, how they dressed, along with their gestures to conform to what appears acceptable to their White peers, frequently feeling as if they have surrendered their Black identity. This frustration grew among my participants and highlights the importance of the impact it has on Black women executives that work in predominantly White spaces which can sometimes feel hostile and unaccommodating to diversity.

The participants stated that the conflict of internalizing these feelings has impacted their mental health, which has influenced how they have been viewed and perceived for promotions within their organizations. Participants spoke about how they have adopted certain ways of how they do their hair, and even creating nicknames to make their names sound 'less black' to be accepted and considered for advancement. These scenarios create discomfort, making it difficult for Black women to fully express themselves and work toward showcasing their leadership potential. With all participants providing examples of how they have experienced tension of being their authentic selves and trying to assimilate to their corporate cultures, an organization must learn how to be sincere with their diversity efforts, and ensure that Black women, and other people of color feel welcomed and valued. When people feel valued it brings them comfort and peace with themselves.

For example, Participant PSC stated:

> I remember the time I was in my client relation executive role and then got promoted to the learning business partner role. I had dyed my hair purple, and I hadn't seen my boss in a long time because she was on another campus and she's the highest that you can go in our in that pillar of the business at our company. Umm and I hadn't seen her in a while and I called my girlfriend who actually I hired into the company years before and I said, I don't know. I wonder if I should get braids or should I color it black. It was a big meeting, and she was like absolutely not. She was like PSC people expect for you to come how you come. She said they expect for your nails to be fly. They expect for you to have the glasses with the funky frames they expect for your hair to be different from the last time they see you. So I was like, you know what? You're right, I'm not going to code switch to bring anybody else any comfort. This is who I am authentically. This is how I

like to wear my hair right now. It might be green next month. I don't know, but what I do know is what you can expect from my work and the color of my hair doesn't change that. So I went on to the meeting with my purple hair and when I first seen my boss, you know, it was other people around. I saw others looking at me, but I brushed it off. She greeted me, hugged me. All of that good stuff. It was fine, but by the end of the day we're about to leave and she was walking behind me she came and said I've been meaning to tell you, I love your hair. And I was like, really? She was like absolutely. It is so you, it is so funky. I love it.

- As I observed participant PSC speak, I noticed how nervous she became as she told me her story on going back and forth with herself on code-switching or remaining authentic. However, when she started mentioning her friend's encouragement of being her authentic self, she started to smile, and she raised the tone of her voice with excitement. When speaking about her supervisor's reaction, she chuckled and appeared to have been recounting the scenario. The words of her leader were shocking, but this gave her confidence and assurance that she was welcomed being her authentic self. This scenario highlights the importance of an organizational culture that embraces authenticity and the positive impact a supporting leader can contribute to Black women that face this dilemma of authenticity versus assimilation.

Participant PCM added to this stating:

The whole impostor syndrome is real for Black women. And so we don't push the envelope and we don't have confidence in ourselves in order to go to the next level. We don't have the same skin color as the majority, or hair is different and majority of the

times if it's not in weave they view your hair as 'unkept' or not professional', we have to change our tone or they saw we seem too aggressive, we have to make sure we don't show too much black pride, and blah blah blah. Sorry I find this irritating as I have had to do this for over 30 years. We're intimidated about entering a room for fear that the light is going to be shined on us. We are going to find ourselves being the only one, and the only ones syndrome is a detractor to our upward mobility. And so we must get past that.

- As I observed Participants PCM facial expression and body language, it was clear that recounting her experiences made her emotional. As she spoke, she shook her head and appeared to be disturbed when explaining the numerous changes she has made, to make her appearance perceived as professional in the workplace. Throughout the interview her disposition suggested that she's had vast experience with being mis-treated within the organizational workforce due to her race and gender.

Participant PCM had a different view of how she navigated the tensions of being her authentic self and assimilation by stating:

> To have a fulfilling discussion and really get to know me, I also refer to that as my light right? It's an old gospel hymn, but you know the whole this little light of mine. I'm gonna let it shine. That always comes in my mind like when I come in the room. So some people cannot and you know, take my light, right? It's too shiny for them and they find it hard to navigate, which is an internal issue they need to deal with. So what I have done in my career is I will not dim my light, for anyone, but will I will make adjustments to make sure that you know, people get to know who I am. And so I think it now an art and a science of balancing, right?

- As I observed Participant PCM, her confidence was bright, her tone was filled with enthusiasm and smiled as she spoke. Throughout her interview, she explained black women are often perceived as intimidating when they exhibit their confidence, and at times she must adjust her demeanor to avoid overwhelming others. However, dimming her confidence too low was not an option for her, as this trait boosted her into executive roles held at different organizations. All my participants recognized that black women with confidence was frequently misinterpreted intimidating or aggressive, highlighting the internal conflict they had with being their authentic selves versus assimilating to their organizational culture.

With more insight from a participant with over 15 years of executive level experience, PKC stated:

> I had to search down those people who look like me because there were so few of us and we weren't working on the same programs. And I would tell you that was for me honestly, I had a lot of problems with even the black people, other black leaders that I would work with. Because sometimes, if you're the one that says, you know, I'm going to tell you, this is what I see, and its not right. We are treated so differently, and this is not gonna work for me. There's a lot of black leaders at the same position or higher that tell me they've heard my statements too many times from other black people, but they have a family to feed. They turn deaf and blind eye to the situations, which is puzzling to me. I seen that a lot and it is sad and scary. I have also been to those support groups where the people that look like you and I, and majority if not all are just so assimilated to the culture. They're like, "I don't want to get involved. I gotta.I gotta have a roof over my

head to stand together and I know the others will see as the troublemaker and I don't want them to see me associated with troublemaker, aka the person who is seeing the wrongdoing and is speaking out, speaking up rather than seeing that as a strength of you know what, you're right. In my head, I'm like what the hell? So we just get pushed around and treated badly because we think they will see us as a troublemaker? Because we have a good job and need to assimilate so they treat us 'decent?' They will move away from you because you once they perceive you as the troublemaker trying to 'speak up.'

- As mentioned in prior statement, PKC is a participant that has vast experience in confronting implicit bias in the workplace and terminating her employment due to discriminatory practices. She expressed great frustration and disappointment with other black leaders that felt assimilating and not speaking up to unfair treatment was the best thing to do, to avoid being labeled as a troublemaker or risk losing their job. I can tell that my interview stirred up emotions that have not been re-visited and brought up intense emotional responses.

Participant PKT added to this subject manner and stated:

I have a variety of people that I interact with and mine have always been a diverse like slate of people in my personal life as well as my work life. Whereas my counterparts, like everybody that they contact at work or outside of work looks like them, thinks like them, lives like them, and it's because perhaps they've never had to assimilate into it an environment or be the only one in the room so they don't try to change this. They have always been the majority. Whereas, we've been more forced to as a people since we stepped into the workforce.

- During my interview with Participant PKT, it was evident that she was a people person, and she made it a goal to have a diverse group of friends that she interacted with both in the workplace and her social life. This was the opposite for her White counterparts in the workplace who have always been part of the majority and tended to associate with people that were like them in appearance, ideology, and lifestyle. PKT highlighted that her White counterparts have never had to assimilate the culture of others or understand the feeling of being a minority in their surroundings. The opposite cannot be said for Black women, and people of color who must assimilate to others of the dominant group to be accepted. Participant PKT insights highlight the challenges Black women face with maintaining their authenticity while adjusting to predominantly White spaces in the workplace.

Summary

In this chapter, I used qualitative phenomenological research to explore participants' lived experiences in executive leadership roles, focusing on the intersectionality of race, gender, and leadership within US corporate business settings. The study used open-ended, semistructured interviews and journaling as data sources.

My research included six Black women who currently hold executive leadership roles in U.S. corporate businesses. Each participant was given the same open-ended questions to answer which provided them with the opportunity to elaborate on their lived experiences. By doing reflective journaling, I was able to control my emotions and express my perspectives so that I did not have any bias influence on the results of my study. I analyzed and interpreted the study

results with the conceptual framework and how the results of this study added to the body of knowledge relating to the intersectionality of gender and race in U.S. corporate business settings.

The key takeaways from my interviews curated four themes that were consistent in each interview. For my participants building and maintaining a community is essential as it provides support and a sense of belonging amid systematic challenges. Participants also faced conflicts of trying to be their authentic selves, while also trying to assimilate to predominantly White spaces in their organizations. This highlighted the complications of how Black women must navigate through professional spaces to be seen as "cultural fit" while also wanting to be their authentic selves without judgement. For all my participants, surviving aggressions, exclusions, and stereotypes is a daily reality, and resilience, along with tools from mentors, have allowed them to properly respond to overcoming these obstacles. By maintaining their well-being through faith, participants spoke about the roadmap their spirituality provided, and how it helped them overcome situations that presented bias and rejection in the workplace.

Establishing a work environment that is inclusive and can allow Black women and people of color to succeed without compromising their identities or being stereotyped is critical in promoting diversity and equity in leadership. Finally, understanding and recognizing the unique barriers faced by Black women in US corporate spaces can pave the way for more equitable opportunities and representation at the executive level.

Participants responses supported the conceptual framework addressing barriers faced by Black women in executive leadership and actions to overcome them. In Chapter 5, I will elaborate on my conclusions and recommendations.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of my research was to study the lived experiences of Black women and the barriers they faced relating to race and gender differences that influenced their leadership development and limitations in U.S. corporate businesses. I aimed to explore the lived experiences as they related to implicit bias in the workplace, how they navigated the challenges based on the intersection of gender and race in their leadership roles, and the coping mechanisms that Black women holding senior level positions in corporate America used to deal with biases resulting from the effects of intersectionality.

Data collection was conducted using the qualitative phenomenology method. To ensure I collected the emotions and stories of my participants, I used semistructured questions and journaled my thoughts after each interview to capture the responses from my participants. To recruit my participants, I reached out to three executive Black women that I knew from corporations that I worked for, and to five participants through LinkedIn where only three responded to me.

In this chapter, I will summarize my key findings and provide an analysis, conclusion of my thoughts, and my recommendations based on the key findings of my study. I will also include the interpretation of my findings, and the limitations I experienced with my study. The chapter will then conclude with the implications and conclusion of the study, and how to improve the experiences of Black females' leaders in executive roles is U.S corporations.

Summary of Key Findings

The aim of my research was to examine how Black women executive leaders navigate the challenges based on the intersection of gender and race in their leadership roles, the strategies

these Black women leaders suggest for improving and informing the cultural competence of their institutions, and how they identify the impact intersectionality has in their organizations based on gender and race. I explained the purpose of the study to each participant and asked open-ended questions to gain insight into their experiences, contributing to a better understanding of the phenomenon of the study. The responses from my participants presented four themes and several subthemes involving their experiences as leaders working in positions not dominated by individuals sharing their racial or gender identification.

All my participants held a bachelor's degree, and a majority of my participants held advanced degrees such as their master's and doctoral degree. In addition, all of them have earned certifications within their field to not only build their knowledge in their industry, but in pursuit of having their education help them advance in corporate U.S organizations. Despite the years of experience that my participants brought into the workforce, they still faced persistent struggles of being doubted on their intelligence and the level of knowledge they brought to the workforce, and lack of promotion or recognition in their field as executive Black leaders in organizations in the United States. Table 5 shows the education level of the participants, additional certifications they have earned to elevate their career and credentials, the industry they specialize in, and the years of experience that they bring to U.S corporations.

Table 5

Participant Education and Training Level

Participant	Education Level	Certifications	Industry	Years' Experience in Field
PCM01	Bachelors	Yes	Human Resources	22+ years
PKW02	Masters	Yes	Human Resources	30+ years
PKC03	Masters	Yes	Technology Intelligence	24+ years
PCA04	Doctoral	Yes	Human Capital Management	18+ years
PSC05	Masters	Yes	Training & Development	20+ years
PKT06	Bachelors	Yes	Human Capital Management	20+ years

Interpretations of Findings

In corporate U.S. businesses, Black women are less likely to get promoted or receive mentoring support, despite all the qualifications they bring into the workplace. The study will serve as a model for other Black women seeking advancement into leadership positions, give insight into issues in the workplace that are often ignored, elevate the voices and experiences of Black women in corporate businesses, and add research to the human resources development industry. The goal of my dissertation is to support the need for current research and the historical background information necessary to structure the rationale and conclusion of this research. The questions asked during my interview with participants was to gain insight into their experiences in US corporate businesses as Black women in executive roles.

The findings of the study highlight how Black women executive leaders navigate the challenges based on the intersection of gender and race in their leadership roles and how they identify the impact intersectionality has in their organizations based off on gender and race. The results of the study prove the organizational barriers that exist in U.S corporations and explain how they hinder Black female leaders gaining access to senior leadership roles. The findings in the study are critical because it can help organizations acknowledge internal disparities such as hiring and promoting processes and can support the innovation of providing new opportunities into leadership roles. If leaders take the accountability to understand the inequities that exist in the workplace, they can improve and implement new initiatives to improve representation, not just for Black women, but all marginalized groups. Doing this can have an overall improvement on the organizational culture and have diverse leadership experiences and perspectives which can drive innovation in the workplace.

The findings of my study aligned with the concepts found in critical race theory and intersectionality of Black women in leadership roles in US corporate businesses. The participants of this study related experiences with racial and gender stereotyping treatment during their careers, which validated the focus on how race and gender influenced the leadership experiences of Black women in corporate U.S. businesses. The four significant themes from my interview questions with my participants were: (a) building and maintaining relationships with other Black professionals, and the value of mentors, (b) the need to maintain well-being through spiritual activities, (c) surviving aggressions, exclusion, and stereotypes, and (d) surviving the tensions of being their authentic selves versus assimilating to their corporate culture.

The first theme highlighted the significance of establishing and maintaining community relationships. Participants stated that the groups serve as platforms for sharing resources and

offer a safe environment where they could exchange experiences and insights. With their voices often being ignored in the workforce, community relationships allowed and welcomed them to not only participate but vent their frustrations safely. The participants consistently acknowledged the advantages of such networks and how these groups motivated them to commit themselves to mentoring other Black women in the workplace and providing guidance on navigating professional environments. Participants believed that maintaining relationships was essential for navigating their professional journeys and overcoming obstacles they experienced in the workforce. The relationships ranged from church gatherings (as all participants identified as Christians) to professional networks focused on the development of Black women.

The second major theme was maintaining well-being through faith. In both their professional and personal lives, participants stated that they utilized faith-based communities for support and like-minded individuals as a support network. Participants indicated that their Christian beliefs contributed to their resilience during challenging times, such as when they experienced disappointment, depression, frustration, or dissatisfaction in the workplace. Through prayer, participants felt capable of overcoming some challenges they faced and believed it helped them to maintain a positive outlook throughout their day and felt as if they had a higher power that was protecting them**.**

The third theme was the focus on how participants survive aggressions, exclusions, and stereotypes in their dominant White workplace. During the interview participants stated they had to develop resilience through learning how to advocate for themselves, which often was turned to a blind eye, seeking support from colleagues within their organization, and navigating their way through the systematic challenges in the workplace. Survival for participants aligned with the theme of having a support system. With a support system, participants stated they could learn

from others' experience, and use those skills observed as a tool on how they can navigate within their organization. Though these scenarios are complex, participants stated they felt at ease realizing they were not the only ones that had such experiences. Having a group of other Black women that shared these same experiences made them realize that they were not the problem, but of the workplace culture. Participant PSC stated, "One, I do think that systemic racism is a big factor. Also, I think systemic sexism is a big factor, so it's compounded, right? Because we're Black. Female." With the intersect of being Black and a woman, participants believed they had a double whammy that was against them and therefore were not seen as favorable in the workplace.

The final theme that all participants shared is experiencing tension with themselves, while trying to be their authentic self and realizing that this was not always understood or accepted in the predominantly White spaces that they worked in. This was a constant struggle for participants, as they strived to maintain their authentic selves while managing perceptions and breaking stereotypes in predominantly White spaces. For example, participant PKC stated:

> I think the biggest obstacle that I have met is real opportunity and feeling like when I was ready to move to do something different or I'm ready to even take on more responsibility. Those opportunities are sometimes not as open for Black women, and so, you know, I think that has been one obstacle and an obstacle of feeling like, I feel like the more especially when I got to the VP level, and it was can we need to mold and shape you to assimilate and fit in. I mean, we've all heard the words right, the rough elbows, or you're too aggressive or, you know, they're not sure how to take you or you need to spend a little bit more time going to dinner and being like them.

If the participant felt like climbing the corporate ladder, she had to mold herself to look, act, and speak like her peers to be presented professionally to be accepted. With assimilating to a dominantly White culture, participants explained how stressful, frustrating, and unnatural the feeling became which created more stress and frustration.

Limitations of the Study

Despite the substantial and empirical evidence of qualitative research about the benefits of conducting individual interviews, efforts to illustrate how a researcher can use specific techniques to examine participants' intersecting identities and build rapport and authentic connections during interviews with Black women have been limited (Walton et al., 2022). Since this research involved the human responses to questions that I selected, so they could recall experiences of their leadership journey as Black women executives, I believe that there were limitations that were outside of my control.

The first limitation of the study was ensuring participants were trustworthy and recounted their experiences of implicit bias without discrepancy. The study of my participants could have presented significant limitations because experiences were not directly observed, and therefore I had to depend on the recollection of each participant. Therefore, it is critical that as more researchers investigate this topic, they properly determine and understand what relevance this will make in their environment. The researcher must understand that recollection of memories is subjective, and based on the questions that are asked, this may have an impact on the participants' memories.

The next limitation was based on the number of participants I had, which cannot generalize my data due to the number of participants. With only six participants, my data do not generalize the experiences for all Black female executives in the workplace. The goal of my

study was to gain a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of my participants, as their story, role, experience, perception will be different from other Black women executives.

The third limitation of the interview questions was that they may have guided participants' responses by providing a framework. Though I assume each participant was forthcoming with their responses, there is still a possibility that some of them may have aligned their responses to fit the narrative of my study. To ensure that I gained complete insights into my participants' experiences, I asked open-ended questions so they could clarify their responses, to help reduce the likelihood of responses being shaped by the research purpose.

The last limitation of the study is related to researcher bias which could have influenced the findings of my study. Yu and Chiu (2019) stated that with qualitative research, the researcher may overshadow the participants' voices by imposing their individual beliefs and intentions at all research stages. To alleviate myself from any research bias, I used reflexivity as a method by journaling my thoughts of the statements and emotions that were expressed by participants.

Implications for Positive Social Change

Despite the significant progress for Black women in executive level positions in U.S. businesses, there remains a fair amount of work to be done to ensure equality in the workplace. Opportunities should be presented for marginalized groups to display their abilities and competencies to showcase their ability to perform alongside their White counterparts.

In my interviews, all participants supported the idea of diversity and inclusion not just for Black women, but for marginalized groups as well. Twelve percent of first-level managers are women of color (i.e., Black, Hispanic, and Asian women), compared to 45% of White men, and 3% of these women reside at the C-suite level, compared to 71% of their White male counterparts who hold these seats (Piazza, 2016). This shows why diversity and inclusion should

be presented in the workplace, especially given that Black women are the most educated group in the U.S., though they are not afforded opportunities like their White counterparts (Sims & Carter, 2019)**.** The findings addressed my research questions by the data found with my participants. Participants confirmed the alignment of fewer opportunities for growth to the intersectionality of their race and gender. Even though I had a total of six participants, which can't be generalized for all Black female executives in the workplace, it provides insights into the research problem and aligns with the prior literature that has been written by previous scholars. Table 6 shows all the subthemes found in my study and the number of times they were referenced in total by my participants.

Table 6

Code Occurrences Chart

Codes	Building & Maintaining Community	Black Mentorship	Community and Relationships	Maintaining Well-Being (self-care)	Faith	Resilience	Surviving Aggressions, Exclusions,	Emotionality	Intersectional	Journeys and Pathway	Marginalization	Stereotype Issues	Workplace Culture	Tensions of Authentic Selves vs.	Assimilation	Imposter Syndrome	Intersectionality in Appearance	Totals
Building & Maintaining Community																		
Black Mentorship			13		2	7			2	3	2	4	1		1			35
Community and Relationships		13			2	8		1	4	8	5	4	3		1		2	51
Maintaining Well-Being (self-care)																		
Faith		2	2			1		1	1	1						1		9
Resilience		7	8		1			1	11	9	7	7	4		5	2	6	68
Surviving Aggressions, Exclusions,																		
Emotionality			1		1	1			3		1	1	1			2	1	12
Intersectional		2	4		1	11		3		8	16	13	7		3	3	14	85
Journeys and Pathway		3	8		1	9			8		5	5	4		1	4	3	51
Marginalization		2	5			7		1	16	5		8	6		1	2	7	60
Stereotype Issues		4	4			7		1	13	5	8		3		1	6	8	60
Workplace Culture		1	3			4		1	7	4	6	3			2	1	2	34
Tensions of Authentic Selves vs.																		
Assimilation		1	1			5			3	1	1	1	2				2	17
Imposter Syndrome					1	2		2	3	4	2	6	1				2	23
Intersectionality in Appearance			2			6		1	14	3	7	8	2		2	2		47
Totals		35	51		9	68		12	85	51	60	60	34		17	23	47	

Recommendations

My recommendation is that executive leaders implement professional development programs to ensure that all employees receive fair and equal opportunities toward advancing career aspirations. These programs must be able to produce data that shows the journey of each candidate that gets promoted in the organization, along with information such as age, gender, race, tenure, and of all historical data on their performance evaluations. My study showed that race and gender were a barrier for Black women to ascend to executive leadership roles.

Some of my participants became so infuriated with the systematic racism in the workplace that they became angry, and one left U.S. corporate businesses altogether to become an entrepreneur to coach women who experienced the same things she went through, helping them rebuild their image. Participant PSC stated:

> I was bitter and I was emotionally scared. So much so that doing my daily work became excruciating because I really felt like I was pouring my heart and soul into something that did not honor me. It got to the point where I would drive up, you know, to the garage where you swipe your badge, and I would just ball. This was in the morning before my day even started. It's just something that eats away at you because you're like you, I did all the things that I was supposed to do. I bring the heat every day. Like I'm never 50 percent, 75 percent, or 99%. I'm always 100% plus every day and to be treated like that was like that was painful. I gave them an opportunity to do the right thing, and they just refused to, so I left.

Due to the current political climate, we are in today with the war against diversity and inclusion programs in the workplace, I recommend there be additional in-depth research when it comes to ethical issues of employee integrity, diversity, lack of internal support mechanisms and

stereotyping based on race and gender. My participants experienced inequalities based on race and gender that caused their work to be evaluated harshly compared to their White male counterparts (participant PCA), not being able to receive credit or ownership of their ideas (participants PKW, PKT, PKC), being treated differently from their White peers (participant PKC), and having to escalate issues to human resources to issue claims of discrimination (participants PSC, PKT, PKC, PCA). Such issues can be understood if more qualitative studies are conducted, followed by empirical studies to achieve generalizability due to larger and more representative samples. Researchers focused on personnel management, workplace organization, or human resources can benefit organizations by taking on such research and expanding hiring practices to consider characteristics of skilled individuals beyond the norm of what an executive leader looks like.

This qualitative phenomenological study explored how Black women executive leaders navigate the challenges based on the intersection of gender and race in their leadership roles, in U.S. corporate businesses. With such limited research that has been conducted on this topic more organizations will benefit from obtaining knowledge, which can help them understand why promoting diversity initiatives is critical in the workforce, and how these organizational initiatives can help support their business objectives.

This study is significant because it showed a pattern of how the intersectionality of race and gender is a common theme among Black women executives in the U.S., and the important role that an organization has in creating a workplace culture that is welcoming to marginalized groups. With increased representation of Black women executives, this can create a positive social change in an organization. The lived experiences of my participants revealed the all-too-common experiences of Black women executives, and the obstacles they had to go through to

maintain and grow in the leadership roles. Participants provided insight into how they sought out mentoring programs that was a safe space, maintaining a community of supporters, and seeking their religion Christianity to help balance them and guide them. The success of these leaders in U.S. corporate businesses, is a motivational factor, that sets a compelling example for other Black women that aspire to be executive leaders in their organization. The advancement of women, especially Black women into executive roles, will provide role models and mentors and encourage other women to pursue their professional aspirations.

Though there have been great accomplishments of Black women entering executive roles, U.S. businesses must continue to ensure that they offer professional development opportunities and reinforce diversity initiatives to addresses the needs of all women; especially Black women as they hold the least number of numbers in executive roles in U.S corporations. My participants taught me that the perceptions that others may have of me that are negative, will come from a place of historical connections. They stated that to ascend into the executive leadership role Black women needed to learn and study their craft, exude confidence, display patience and understanding, but of all to be unafraid of failure.

This statement correlated with participant PKW, who stated:

> You are already at Ground Zero. You're Black and you're a woman, so from the bottom the only way there is up, and if they're going to say no, let them tell you don't tell yourself.

The lived experiences of each of my participants in this study gave me insight from a professional and personal perspectives when they shared their personal insights into how they climbed the corporate ladder to an executive role. Even though each participant had their own unique experiences, the commonalities of their experiences emerged in themes such as race, and

sex which contributed to the denial of earned promotions, lack of mentors and representation that lacked role models, having to work harder than their White peers for recognition, and of all stereotypes being held against them. The significance of this study includes implications for additional research in the Human Resources Development field, to provide insight into organizations and the development of their talent and ensuring that equality of opportunity is attainable for every employee regardless of their race or gender. This study provides insights to leaders who wish to understand the different obstacles Black women face in the workplace compared, to other marginalized groups, and of all their White counterparts. With this knowledge, leaders will be equipped to understand and embrace a more diverse team.

Conclusion

This qualitative phenomenological study was designed to understand the lived experiences of Black women executives and the challenges they encountered related to race and gender differences that affected their leadership development and limitations in U.S. corporate businesses. When it comes to women entering senior-level roles, they have limited access to representation or mentors that are in higher positions to help guide their development as they pursue advancing through their careers. The participants in the study demonstrated their abilities to maintain professionalism, integrity, and mental health though mentoring and business resource groups, from other Black women in similar leadership roles or higher. All the participants possessed advanced college degrees and additional certifications in their respected industry to maintain their current position or to be considered for advancement.

Although significant research is needed, this phenomenological study contributes to an existing body of human resource development research, women's leadership, and Black

leadership by implementing intersectionality as the conceptual framework to explore how race and gender identities shape Black women executives' experiences in U.S. businesses.

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APPENDIX A. PARTICIPANT REQUEST EMAIL

Dissertation Participant Recruitment Email

Dear Participant,

I am reaching out today to invite you to participate in a study that I am conducting. As a Black female professional in the U.S. corporate workplace, you have likely had some unique experiences along the course of your professional journey. Perhaps there were times when you were made to feel less than, isolated, alone, or weeded out. If you can relate to some or all these scenarios, then I will be honored to hear about your journey.

Participant selection criteria include:

- Self-identify as a Black female
- Have held or currently holding an executive leadership position in a U.S. corporate business.

If you would like to participate in this study, please send an email to Isatha.Fofanah@colostate.edu. I will then contact you to schedule a virtual interview with the provider of your choice. Interviews will last approximately 90 minutes. I will report broad themes from my study and use direct quotes as support for those themes. When quotations are used, I will attribute them to a pseudonym (I will not use your legal name). I will be collecting some demographic information. When I report and share the data with others, I will aggregate this information. I will keep your data confidential; your name and responses will be kept separately. Any personal identifiers will be removed from the transcript of your interview and

will be kept in an encrypted file on a password-protected computer, accessible to me and the Principal Investigator, Dr. Vincent Basile.

While there are no direct benefits of participating, you will gain a better understanding of the experiences among other Black female executive leaders in U.S. corporate businesses. In addition, the findings in this research can be utilized to make policy changes that enable Black female leaders to access opportunities and thrive while in governance and bring awareness to encourage diversity and inclusion programs to support Black women in their leadership journey.

The risks of participating in this study are minimal. However, there may be psychological discomfort from participating in this study, as you may be reflecting on uncomfortable/traumatic experiences. It is not possible to identify all potential risks in research procedures, but the researchers have taken reasonable safeguards to minimize any known and potential (but unknown) risks.

If you have any questions about this research, please contact me, Isatha, at Isatha.Fofanah@colostate.edu; (303)718-0823 or Dr. Vincent Basile at Vincent.Basile@colostate.edu. If you have any questions about your rights as a volunteer in this research, contact the CSU IRB at: RICRO_IRB@mail.colostate.edu; (970)491-1553.

APPENDIX B. PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

Colorado State University

Consent to Participate in Research

Introduction and Purpose

My name is Isatha A. Fofanah, and I am a doctoral student at Colorado State University. My faculty advisor is Associate Professor Vincent Basile, Ph.D. in the School of Education. I invite you to participate in my research study on which will focus on how Black females' leaders have overcome barriers throughout their leadership journey.

Procedures

If you agree to participate in my research, I will interview you based on your availability on the platform Microsoft Teams. If you consent to participating and being recorded, I will record our conversation on the platform and take notes throughout the interview. The purpose of recording our conversations is to accurately account for your experiences and will only be utilized for transcription purposes. If you don't want it to be recorded, I will take handwritten notes. If for any reason you don't wish to answer a question, you can decline to answer, stop the interview, and/or withdraw from the process at any time. It is expected that we will only need one interview, but follow-ups may be needed for added clarification and to ensure accuracy of the data provided. If this occurs, I will contact you via the contact information you provided to follow up.

Benefits

There is no direct benefit to you from taking part in this study. It is hoped that the research will help present new concepts to the Human Resource Development industry and provide me with new ideas and perspectives to develop new initiatives behind diversity and inclusion.

Risks/Discomforts

While there is minimal risk in participating in this study, the questions and interview could possibly recall experiences that can lead to discomfort or feelings of negativity. Some of the research questions may make you uncomfortable or upset. You are free to decline to answer any questions you do not wish to, or to stop the interview at any time.

As with all research, there is a chance that confidentiality could be compromised; however, we are taking precautions to minimize this risk.

Confidentiality

Your study data will be handled as confidentially as possible. If the results of this study are published or presented, individual names and other personally identifiable information will not be used.

To minimize the risks to confidentiality, we will save all files and transcripts on a device that is password protected and encrypted. In addition, the data will be coded in a password-protected and encrypted database on the coding platform, Dedoose. All interviews will be transcribed

through the transcription service, Rev. Only myself and my advisor, Dr. Vincent Basile, will have access to the data collected.

We will transcribe the audio recordings as soon as possible after the interview and then destroy the recordings once the audio is transcribed. When the research is completed, I will save the transcriptions and other study data for possible use in future research done by myself or others. I will retain these records for up to three years after the study is over. The same measures described above will be taken to protect confidentiality of this study data. We may be asked to share the research files with the sponsor or the CSU Institutional Review Board ethics committee for auditing purposes. Your identity/record of receiving compensation (NOT your data) may be made available to CSU officials for financial audits.

Rights

Participation in research is completely voluntary. You are free to decline to take part in the project. You can decline to answer any questions and are free to stop taking part in the project at any time. Whether or not you choose to participate in the research and whether you choose to answer any questions or continue participating in the project, there will be no penalty to you or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

Questions

If you have any questions about this research, please feel free to contact me at (303) 718-0823 or Isatha.Fofanah@colostate.edu. You may also contact Principal Investigator, Vincent Basile, at Vincent.basile@colostate.edu

If you have any questions about your rights or treatment as a research participant in this study, please contact the Colorado State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) at: 970-491-1553, or e-mail CSU_IRB@colostate.edu .

CONSENT

Participant Consent:

Your signature acknowledges that you have read the information stated and voluntarily wish to participate in this research. Your signature also acknowledges that you have received, on the date signed, a copy of this document containing 3 pages.

_____ _____

Signature of participant Date

_____

Name of participant

_____ _____

Signature of person providing information Date

_____

Name of person providing information

Do you consent for your interview to be audiotaped?

___Yes

___No

If you wish to participate in this study, please sign and date below. You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep for your own records.

_____

Participant's Name *(please print)*

_____ _____

Participant's Signature Date

Interviews will start July 1st and finish until August 9th. Please provide the best times and dates that will work for you so I can schedule our call.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

APPENDIX C – PARTICIPANT INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Demographic Questionnaire

First-Round Interviews – Career History:

1. How long did it take to reach a leadership-level position?
2. What positions have you held at a leadership level?
3. What positions along your career trajectory most prepared you for an executive-level role?
4. How did you prepare yourself for a leadership-level position?
5. What makes a good leader?
6. What makes a bad leader?

Second-Round Interviews – Details of Experience:

1. What strategies, environments, and resources support Black women in attaining and retaining leadership roles in the corporate industry?
2. What relationships influenced your ascension to a leadership position?
3. What obstacles have you overcome that caused you the most hesitation in progressing to the next level in your career?
4. Have you experienced marginalization in your role as a leader? Tell me your story (as
5. much as you feel comfortable with).
6. Have you been treated differently than your White peers? Are there stories you're
7. comfortable sharing?
8. Identify three leadership factors that African American/Black women can use to assist in ascending to the next level of their career.
9. Why do you think the percentage of African American/Black women in executive-level positions in the U.S. are less than 1%?

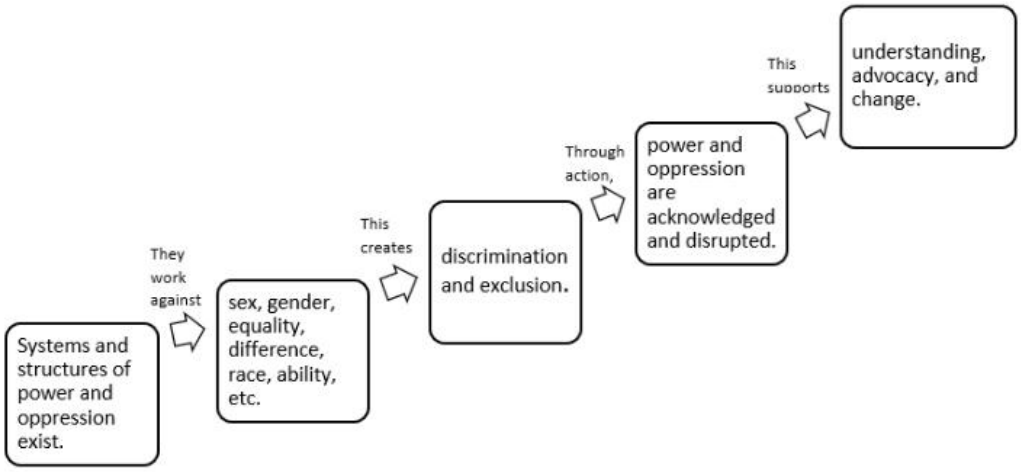
10. What specific embraced values have you seen demonstrated in organizations that have impacted or not impacted your progression to an executive-level position?

Uplifting Yourself and Others Through Mentorship

1. What has your experience with mentoring?
2. Can you talk about a mentor that you have had that made a difference for you?
3. What has your experience as a mentor to others?
4. What has been your experience as a mentor to students, Black students, and/or students of color?
5. What does it take to feel uplifted? Examples?
6. What keeps you going?
7. What advice would you give another African American/Black woman aspiring to a leadership level position?

APPENDIX D: ACADEMIC WHEEL OF PRIVILEGE

APPENDIX E: MODEL OF FEMINIST THEORY



APPENDIX F: PARTICIPANT CHARACTERISTICS

Participant Code	Job Title	Age	Years in Executive Position	Education Level
PCM01	Vice President of Benefits	41-50	11	Bachelors
PKW02	Human Resources Executive	41-50	4	Masters
PKC03	Strategic Customer Success Executive	41-50	12	Masters
PCA04	Client Relations Executive	31-41	3	Doctoral
PSC05	Client Relations Executive	31-41	8	Masters
PKT06	Senior Director, Client Executive	41-50	9	Bachelors

APPENDIX G: SEMISTRUCTURED SCHEDULE INTERVIEW LOG

Participant Code	Date Of Interview	Permission To Record	Audio Or Video Recording	Start Time	End Time	Duration (In Minutes)
PCM01	11-JUL-24	YES	BOTH	5:00PM EST	6:06PM EST	66 MINUTES
PKW02	26-JUL-24	YES	BOTH	4:00PM EST	5:13PM EST	73 MINUTES
PKC03	27-JUL-24	YES	BOTH	12:00PM EST	1:21PM EST	81 MINUTES
PCA04	31-JUL-24	YES	AUDIO	4:00PM EST	5:25PM EST	85 MINUTES
PSC05	8-AUG-24	YES	BOTH	5:00PM EST	730PM EST	146 MINUTES
PKT06	12-AUG-25	YES	AUDIO	7:00PM EST	8:10PM EST	70 MINUTES

APPENDIX H: CONCEPT WORD CODE COUNTS

Concept Label	Code Counts
Workplace Culture	51
Stereotype Issues	30
Resilience	41
Marginalization	45
Maintaining Well-Being (self-care)	0
Journeys and Pathway	40
Intersectionality in Appearance	19
Intersectional	36
Imposter Syndrome	19
Faith	17
Emotionality	11
Community and Relationships	45
Black Mentorship	43
Assimilation	20

APPENDIX I: THEMES AND SUBTHEMES AMONG PARTICIPANTS

Title	Description
Building & Maintaining Community	All participants expressed the significance of engaging in supportive professional networks that support Black professional women.
Black Mentorship	Women spoke about how they were mentored by black and non'-'black leaders and how this had an impact on their careers. Each participant spoke about how they mentor other black students as well.
Community and Relationships	Participants spoke about their partnerships in church, women groups with other black women, and spoke about their safe net they found in the workplace.
Maintaining Well'-'Being	Each participant mentioned maintaining their well'-'being through their Christian faith, prayer, and meditation to navigate challenges and achieve inner peace.
Faith	Participants all stated that faith has been a great tool to help them overcome resilience, and the issues they've faced in the workplace.
Resilience	Resilience in the workplace for participants meant the ability to thrive in the face of adversity while also acknowledging the toll of constant resilience. These participants were aware of the workplace culture but had developed strengths in how to overcome.
Surviving Aggressions, Exclusions, and Stereotypes	All participants spoke about surviving aggressions, exclusions, and stereotypes by refining resilience through self'-'advocacy, and community support from other professionals.
Emotionality	Participants spoke about how they were expected to control, modify and suppress emotions in ways that their white counterparts, are not.
Intersectional	The ways gender and race are aligned with one another.
Journeys and Pathway	This is where women explain their career journey to be executive leaders.

Marginalization	Participants gave insight into experiences on they have been heavily impacted by bias in hiring and promotions.
Stereotype Issues	Participants spoke about the negative stereotypes from the media about black women and the serious disadvantages it puts them in the workplace.
Workplace Culture	All participants believed that leadership could create a safe environment by actions and not mission statements.
Tensions of Authentic Selves vs. Assimilation	Participants gave examples of how daily they found themselves, trying to navigate the tension between being their authentic selves and assimilating into workplace cultures.
Assimilation	This is where women explained how they had to change certain aspects of their identity to become like their white counterparts.
Imposter Syndrome	My participants had persistent self-doubt and the inability to believe that one's success is deserved, despite evidence of competence.
Intersectionality in Appearance	Participants stated that they felt like they had to wear their hair straight to be seen as professional, speak in a certain tone and manner, and appear to be approachable as often they were seen as 'intimidating.'

APPENDIX J: PARTICIPANT EDUCATION, AND TRAINING LEVEL

Participant	Education Level	Certifications	Industry	Years' Experience in Field
PCM01	Bachelors	Yes	Human Resources	22+ years
PKW02	Masters	Yes	Human Resources	30+ years
PKC03	Masters	Yes	Technology Intelligence	24+ years
PCA04	Doctoral	Yes	Human Capital Management	18+ years
PSC05	Masters	Yes	Training & Development	20+ years
PKT06	Bachelors	Yes	Human Capital Management	20+ years

APPENDIX K: CODE OCCURRENCES CHART

Codes	Building & Maintaining Community	Black Mentorship	Community and Relationships	Maintaining Well-Being (self-care)	Faith	Resilience	Surviving Aggressions, Exclusions,	Emotionality	Intersectional	Journeys and Pathway	Marginalization	Stereotype Issues	Workplace Culture	Tensions of Authentic Selves vs.	Assimilation	Imposter Syndrome	Intersectionality in Appearance	Totals
Building & Maintaining Community																		
Black Mentorship			13		2	7			2	3	2	4	1		1			35
Community and Relationships		13			2	8		1	4	8	5	4	3		1		2	51
Maintaining Well-Being (self-care)																		
Faith		2	2			1		1	1	1						1		9
Resilience		7	8		1			1	11	9	7	7	4		5	2	6	68
Surviving Aggressions, Exclusions,																		
Emotionality			1		1	1			3		1	1	1			2	1	12
Intersectional		2	4		1	11		3		8	16	13	7		3	3	14	85
Journeys and Pathway		3	8		1	9			8		5	5	4		1	4	3	51
Marginalization		2	5			7		1	16	5		8	6		1	2	7	60
Stereotype Issues		4	4			7		1	13	5	8		3		1	6	8	60
Workplace Culture		1	3			4		1	7	4	6	3			2	1	2	34
Tensions of Authentic Selves vs.																		
Assimilation		1	1			5			3	1	1	1	2				2	17
Imposter Syndrome					1	2		2	3	4	2	6	1				2	23
Intersectionality in Appearance			2			6		1	14	3	7	8	2		2	2		47
Totals		35	51		9	68		12	85	51	60	60	34		17	23	47	