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Barriers Encountered by African American Women Executives

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This is to certify that the doctoral study by

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Walden University
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Abstract

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MBA, University of Phoenix, 2009

BFA, American Intercontinental University, 2007

Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

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Abstract

In 2014, less than 16% of executive leaders in U.S. corporations were women and less than 5.3% of executive leaders in U.S. corporations were African American women. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the experiences of 20 African American women in senior executive positions in the Southeastern region of the United States. The goal of this study was to provide business leaders with information to recognize the value of diversity and equality in the workplace. Participants were recruited using snowball sampling. The conceptual framework incorporated general systems theory, which highlights the bidirectionality between an individual and his or her environment. Data were gathered from audio-recorded semistructured interviews that were transcribed and coded for emergent themes. The findings revealed several strategies for success among African American women, such as tolerating opposition in a male-dominated work environment, and overcoming barriers such as race and gender discrimination. These findings have implications of positive social change by increasing awareness among business leaders of racial inequalities in the workplace. Such awareness may, in turn, decrease workplace discrimination to foster a more conducive environment to promote African American women into executive leadership positions. By making the issues of inequalities for African American women more visible, this research opens the opportunity to discuss the topic and seek resolutions across all organizations.

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Dedication

In loving memory of my father, George E. Cain. You have taught me how to truly be a fighter and I am forever grateful to you for that. You give me the strength to continue to fight through all the obstacles and barriers. I love you and miss you, Dad.

- El Shaddai is more than enough – The Bible

Acknowledgments

First, I thank God for the blessings He has bestowed upon me. For I know without Him, I am nothing. I stand strong in my faith that God will continue to bless me and guide me to accomplish many remarkable successes during this lifetime.

He replied, "Because you have so little faith. Truly I tell you, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you."-Matthew 20:17

All that I am, I owe to my mother–Margaret Cain. Thank you, Mom, for always believing in me even when I did not believe in myself. My love for you surpasses explanation. To my grandmother (GG)–Beulah Dukes, you are my inspiration. Thank you for all the prayers that I knew you were saying for me without me asking for them. Because of you, I know I am always covered. To my sister, Brenda Cain, who has been there for me on so many occasions; I have lost count. Thank you for the love, support and just being there when I needed you most. I really appreciate you and love you. To Nicole Nall (TT), who entered into my family and someone who I love just as a sister; thank you so much for all your love and support. To my brother, Michael Cain, thank you for just being you; always at the right time. I love you. To Maxine Cain, Brandon Cain, and Lauren Cain, thank you for your love and support. I love you all. To my friend, Tiffany Simmons, thank you for your support through it all. It is because of you that I decided to venture on this journey of becoming a Doctor. And what a journey it was! I love you and greatly appreciate you. I thank my extended family and friends for the love and support during this journey and your encouraging words definitely did not fall on deaf ears. I

received every word and I truly appreciate each of you. To my chair, Dr. Judith Blando, thank you for your wisdom and continuous support and wealth of knowledge you have shared with me. I appreciate you. To my second chair, Dr. Timothy Malone, I appreciate your feedback and assistance in me reaching this point of my journey. To the successful African American women who shared their personal stories with me, I am forever grateful for you. Thank you for openly sharing and participating in this doctoral research study. To the love of my life, Torrance Space, I am so happy God placed you back in my life for us to take this journey together. Thank you for your unwavering support. I appreciate you and love you. To my two heartbeats, Jordyn and Carter, I love you both to the edge of the earth and back. You two are truly the reasons why I do it all. Thank you both for giving me life!

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Section 1: Foundation of the Study

African American women in predominantly European American organizations based on their race, social class, and gender experience restrictions in their process to leadership positions (Byrd, 2009). In this study, I explored the strategies of African American women who reached senior executive levels and evaluated the strategies used to achieve senior executive positions. Highlighted in this qualitative research study were the strategies that African American women implemented while working in business and building their careers. The focus of this research study was to explore the lack of diversity, equal opportunities, and mentorship in the workplace. Creating a work environment that promotes equality, fairness, and opportunities for everyone is a business ethical issue that African American women face in the workplace more often than not.

There have been disadvantages for African American women who strive to build their careers. By using their talents and abilities, many African American women have accomplished remarkable goals for themselves, the organizations they work in, and communities. As African American women continue to pursue advancement in their careers, various adversities may require immediate attention to ensure opportunities for career advancement to senior level positions are available. In this research study, the problems and strategies evaluated were to research the benefits of diversity, equal opportunities, and mentorship and to provide steps to suggest changes in processes to advance African American women to senior executive positions.

Background of the Problem

The focus of this research study was to explore African American women and their ascent to senior executive positions in corporations in the United States. The purpose of this research study was to explore the experiences of African American women and the lack of diversity and equal opportunities in the workplace that has prohibited them from advancing to executive leadership roles. As of 2014, only 6% of the chief executive officers (CEOs) in the United States were women, in which less than 16% of executive leaders in U.S. corporations were women (Cook & Glass, 2014). In the 1960s, after the civil rights movement, women of various ethnic groups accepted positions into a few upper-management-level roles. Changes in U.S. society provided more opportunities for African American and European American women, but there has been clear evidence that there is economic marginalization of African American women and inequality (Hill, 2013).

African American women tend to make less money when compared to European American counterparts based on salary and title within organizations (U.S. Department of Labor, 2012). As society advanced and cultural habits transitioned, the United States created the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) to ensure employees receive fair treatment and the same opportunities. The responsibility of the EEOC is to ensure everyone receives equal treatment and no one experiences discrimination, regardless of race, nationality, or sex. African American women who strive for senior executive level positions may be at a disadvantage. The purpose of this research study was to explore the experiences of African American women who reached senior

executive level positions and highlighted the importance of equal opportunities and mentoring in the workplace. In this doctoral research study, I highlighted the experiences of African American women in positions such as presidents, vice presidents, and senior managers.

Problem Statement

Only 6% of the CEOs in the United States were women as of 2014, and less than 16% of executive leaders in U.S. corporations were women (Cook & Glass, 2014). Various barriers such as stereotypes and the glass ceiling have continued to prohibit African American women from contributing their achievements and skills to the corporate world (Hill, 2013). The general business problem is few African American women fill senior executive level positions. The specific business problem is that African American women do not receive equal opportunities to excel to senior executive level leadership positions because of the lack of diversity in the workplace.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the experiences of African American women and the lack of diversity and equal opportunities in the workplace that prohibits them from advancing to executive leadership roles in their careers. The targeted population comprised African American women in the southeastern region of the United States who had successfully attained senior executive level management positions. The implications for positive social change included the potential to provide business leaders with information that may validate the

value of diversity and mentorship programs required to provide women with an equal opportunity to excel to the next level in their careers.

Nature of the Study

Both qualitative and quantitative research offer scholarly inquiry, but the qualitative approach is different because of the philosophical assumptions, methods of data collection, and interpretation involved (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). African American women shared lived experiences regarding career advancement into senior executive level management positions in this qualitative research study. Qualitative data are different from quantitative data because qualitative research includes the culture of the study and the society in which the participants live (Brod, Tesler, & Christensen, 2009). Quantitative researchers seek to factor the influences or correlate the concepts (Brod et al., 2009). Highlighted in this doctoral research study are the lived experiences of African American women and what factors prohibited them from achieving a senior executive level position. The purpose of this research study was to explore the experiences of 20 African American women who reached senior executive level management positions, equal opportunities, and the use of mentors.

The focus of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore how 20 African American women successfully obtained senior executive level management positions in corporations and academia in the southeastern region of the United States. The best research method for this research study was qualitative research method more so than quantitative or mixed methods. The better-suited design for this research study was phenomenological design because the African American women shared their lived

experiences from their perceptions of the difficulties they encountered. African American women shared lived experiences and the strategies used to reach senior executive levels in their careers. Qualitative research is a method of evaluating the lived experiences of individuals and collecting information in their own language and terms (Kirk & Miller, 1986). The data from this study may support social change by providing African American women with more understanding of how to reach senior executive level management positions in their careers. The data may also influence business practices regarding the accession of African American women.

Research Question

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the experiences of African American women and the lack of diversity and equal opportunities in the workplace that has prohibited them from advancing to executive leadership roles in their careers. I highlighted the difficulties that African American women faced when starting their careers and the path traveled to reach their current senior executive level management position. Twenty African American women participated in this research study, and the central question for this research study was as follows:

What strategies enhance the senior executive level career opportunities for African American women in the workplace?

The following are the interview questions presented to the women in this study:

1. What is the title of your current senior executive position?

2. How long did it take to reach a senior-level position?

3. What specific personal characteristics would you say contributed most to your career development?

4. How did you prepare yourself for a senior-level position?

5. How did developing a relationship with mentors influence your ascension to a senior executive position?

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

7. How did your educational and training background contribute to the ascent to your senior-level position?

8. Why do you think the percentage of African American women in senior-level positions is less than 1%?

9. What advice would you give an African American woman aspiring to a senior executive position?

10. What are three factors in leadership that African American women can use to ascend to the next level of their career?

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

Conceptual Framework

General systems theory (GST) was the conceptual framework for this research study. Systems theory is the method associated with how one aspect influences another. Biologist Von Bertalanffy introduced GST in 1949 (Shin & Konrad, 2014). Von Bertalanffy noted that everything in the environment interacts so that systems and people

align together to create a positive working environment (Shin & Konrad, 2014). Kast and Rosenzweig (1972) ascertained that organizational systems include boundaries that contribute to the separation of organizations and the environment. Open systems have five essential components: structural, technical, goals, psychosocial, and managerial subsystems (Kast & Rosenzweig, 1972).

GST is the means of evaluating the parts of a system and the variation of how everything operates (Shin & Konrad, 2014). When an open system receives the information in its environment, the environment interacts to create an organization that will survive and prosper (University of Twente, 2012). Highlighted through the systems theory is the importance of all things and people working together to create a well balance outcome.

Definition of Terms

This section includes definitions of terms within the study that may give a common understanding. The definitions are in accordance to the use of the word in context. The terms below are used throughout this research study to describe various understanding based on the context of the term.

C-suite: C-suite refers to top senior executives whose titles start with *C*, such as chief executive officer, chief operating officer, and chief information officer (Cook & Glass, 2014).

Diversity: Diversity is to be different, diverse, or varied. To have people from different races and cultures combined in a group or corporation (Buttner, Lowe, & Billings-Harris, 2012).

Executive: An executive is a person who holds senior managerial authority in a business or organization. Executives are the leaders of a business or organization (Cook & Glass, 2014).

Glass ceiling: A glass ceiling is an invisible barrier that hinders women or minorities from reaching upper-level positions in the workplace despite qualifications and skills (Smith, 2012).

Lived experience: An experience a person has encountered in a lifetime is a lived experience (Exkano, 2013).

Mentoring: Mentoring is a relationship between two people in which the senior mentor is offering guidance to a junior protégé (Irby, 2014).

Sisters of the Academy (SOTA): SOTA, founded in 2001, is a leadership group that supports African American women who have a tenure-track position in academia. SOTA was created to provide networking opportunities for African American women in the academia arena (Davis, Reynolds, & Jones, 2011).

Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations

Assumptions

An assumption was that participants would answer questions honestly. The participants understood the anonymity and confidentiality of the study and openly shared lived experiences to contribute to the data of this research study. The participants' responses were their true responses to the interview questions; to my knowledge, no biased opinions surfaced during the interview. An assumption was that the numbers have increased for African American women building careers in organizations consisting

predominantly of European Americans, but evidence indicated that career opportunities with counterparts are not equal (Khosrovani & Ward, 2011). Another assumption was that responses to the interview questions were solely the opinion of the participants, who shared their personal experiences.

An assumption was that equal opportunities are not available to African American women at senior executive level positions because of their race and gender. If properly implemented, organizations' mentoring programs would increase the number of African American women in upper-level positions. By managing mentoring practices within organizations, mentoring programs designed by senior staff may also highlight cultural differences and boost morale among the workplace (Khosrovani & Ward, 2011).

Limitations

Baron (2010) suggested limitations of a research study are factors that a researcher has no control over. By defining the limitations of this research study, I highlighted the potential weaknesses. The scope of this study was African American women in senior executive positions in corporations and academia in the southeastern region of the United States. The selection of a qualitative method and a phenomenological design provided an opportunity to explore and analyze the central phenomenon. The number of African American women in senior executive positions limited the accessibility to a larger number of women of this caliber. To increase generalization, different regions across the United States could add to future research on this topic.

Delimitations

The focus of this doctoral research study was on African American women in senior executive level management positions in the southeastern region of the United States in organizations and academia. Baron (2010) suggested that the research does have some control over the delimitation factors. The intent of this study was to focus on individuals who worked in various industries and were senior executives. The criteria for participants in this study were the following: (a) the women were in senior executive positions, (b) the women were open to sharing perspectives regarding the research topic, and (c) they were willing to participate in the interview openly and honestly. The 20 participants in this research study worked for corporations and in academia in the southeastern region of the United States.

<p style="text-align:center">**Significance of the Study**</p>

Contribution to Business Practice

The focus of this study involved researching the lived experiences of African American women who held a senior executive level management position. The significance of this research study was to explore the experiences and career advancements of African American women in senior executive level management positions, equal opportunities, and mentoring in the workplace. An attribute of this research was to bring the issue to the forefront and add relevance to previous research on similar topics. Value is added to this research study from highlighting the process of operating a business and providing equal opportunities for all workers.

The findings indicated that many respondents believed that in crucial areas of job advancement (e.g., advanced training, mentoring, and promotion), they do not receive what they considered to be a fair share of opportunities from their organizations. Some respondents felt that other minority employees received more attention and favorable treatment at work than they did (Khosrovani & Ward, 2011). Thus, if African Americans lack the same access to mentors, especially relative to European Americans, they will probably not enjoy the same career rewards in terms of promotions and pay raises (Khosrovani & Ward, 2011). According to a Democratic Task Force study of the 500 Fortune Companies (as cited in Khosrovani & Ward, 2011), as U.S. dependence on the global economy increases and international relations expand, the multicultural work force in the United States can provide the best services to global clients, extend American competitiveness in the world economy, and support American enterprises.

Although increasing numbers of African Americans are employed in predominantly European American organizations, anecdotal and scholarly evidence has indicated that African Americans must still overcome barriers to have similar career trajectories as their European American counterparts (Khosrovani & Ward, 2011). The idea for this study was from other studies pertaining to racial discrimination and inequalities at the workplace as experienced by African Americans. In contrast, African Americans and members of other ethnic minorities were at a disadvantage in receiving job offers because of their lack of access to or lesser use of professional networking. In addition, during the hiring process, African Americans were specifically at a disadvantage (Khosrovani & Ward, 2011). Consequently, these perceptions have affected

their leadership appraisals. Race plays a major role in a leader's career advancement, particularly when the person has demonstrated success in leadership (Khosrovani & Ward, 2011).

DiTomaso (2014) studied the structural positions of various racial groups in science and engineering and their access to important work assignments, managerial promotion, and performance ratings. The U.S.-born White males, as in-group members, were perceived as the most competent employees in their fields; therefore, they had greater access to "favorable work experience" (technical control), as well as receiving high performance assessments in both innovation and promote ability. On the other hand, U.S.-born Black women received the most unfavorable assessments, both in innovation and upward mobility, which adversely affected their performance reviews when compared to all other groups, including Black men and employees who had immigrated to the United States, who were rated average.

By understanding how individuals think and feel about their work outcomes, through the fair distribution of career opportunities, and equitable treatment of employees, organizations could increase employees' job satisfaction, which could improve productivity, maximize profits, and increase company success. Perceived or real inequality at the workplace hampers employees' morale, resulting in apathy dissatisfaction, and subsequent loss of experienced manpower to competitors (Khosrovani & Ward, 2011). This is what is important to the advancement of society, as the United States increasingly becomes a multiethnic and multicultural nation. Most people are more likely to enter and stay in an organization if they discern that career

opportunities are equitable. An ideal workplace is one that includes all employees and excludes none (Khosrovani & Ward, 2011).

Implications for Social Change

The implications for positive social change include the potential to enhance equal opportunities for African American women in senior executive level positions, and employers must take on the responsibility to provide mentors to employees who want to advance their careers to senior levels. Results of this study may provide improvement to social change for African American women seeking to advance to senior executive level positions. Change is about building community and changing the attitudes and behaviors of the people in the community (Fund for Southern Communities, 2012). African American women in senior executive positions may contribute to society based on their lived experiences. On-the-job mentoring may improve the chances of African American women to be considered for senior level positions according to (Khosrovani & Ward, 2011).

A Review of the Professional and Academic Literature

In 2010, 123 million women were in the United States civilian population, and 72 million, or 58.6%, were in the labor force (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2014). In 2009, although women's earnings increased as compared to their male counterparts, African American women's salaries were still lower than their counterparts of different races and gender. Inflation adjusted earnings for African American women increased by 25% in 2009, compared to a 32% increase for non-African American women (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2014). The objective of this study was to explore the

experiences of African American women in senior executive positions, equal

opportunities, and mentoring in the workplace. I highlighted African American women in

senior executive positions and the path the women took to obtain a senior leadership role.

The research results may assist aspiring African American women seeking to advance to

a senior executive position and what strategies to emulate to excel. The results may also

be beneficial to leaders to operate their business based on a GST in which Von

Bertalanffy noted that everything in the environment interacts so that systems and people

align together to create a positive working environment.

Equal Opportunity

African American women use different strategies in their ascent to top-ranking

positions that men often dominate (Wyatt & Silvester, 2015). Three research questions

were the focus of Wyatt and Silvester's study: (a) are the strategies used a predictor of

securing top-ranking positions, (b) are there strategic differences between professions,

and (c) are demographics influencing factors in the types of strategies used? Wyatt and

Silvester collected data from 20 professional African American women and 20 European

American women who held memberships in various professional organizations. Based on

the data, the strategies the authors concluded to be helpful to the women were

networking, professional development, and performance evaluation. Fagenson and

Jackson (1993) discussed the status of women managers in the United States and

projections about the future of women's careers. Fagenson and Jackson focused on the

differences between minority and nonminority women managers and highlighted barriers

that women faced as managers and noted how women overcame these obstacles and became successful.

Philippe (2011) reflected about how as the media portray African American women as highly successful, a lack of equal pay still exists. Representatives of the National Women's Law Center (2012) presented that American women who work full-time year-round earn $0.77 for every $1 paid to their male counterparts. African American women make only $0.62 to every dollar paid to European American, non-Hispanic men (National Women's Law Center, 2012).

Harzing and Metz (2011) examined the representation of women on editorial boards in management. The results reflected an underrepresented number of women as first authors in various journals. Two reasons were the prestige of the journal and the gender of the editor. African American women can become successful in the library profession, but to receive equal opportunities, the women will need additional attributes or certain attributes such competency, extended research knowledge, and managerial attributes (Wolfe & Dilworth, 2015). To compare to the predominantly European Americans academic research library environment, African American female executives will need to acquire additional business and leadership skills to compete on a fair level with counterparts (Wolfe & Dilworth, 2015).

Despite the odds against attaining senior executive position, African American women continued to pursue higher education degrees and strive to ascend to the next level of their careers. Kaba (2011) conjectured that African American women are geniuses. Despite the obstacles that African American women overcame for almost 400

years, since 1619, African American women excelled (Kaba, 2011). Even though African American women are intelligent and possess many talents, the women continue to experience exclusion from national executive positions in their own country (Kaba, 2011). Exkano (2013) examined the lived experiences of African American women in senior-level administrator positions at colleges and universities in the United States and found that African American women who possessed high-level degrees and jobs still encountered social inequity based on race, gender, and social class.

Stereotypes usually group most African American women in the same social class and the women receive inequity based on stereotypes (Exkano, 2013). Khosrovani and Ward (2011) discussed the inequalities that African American women still face when seeking to expand their career in a predominantly European American organization. African American women must overcome obstacles to obtain similar career advancements as their European American counterparts (Khosrovani & Ward, 2011). African American women participants believed that poor training, lack of mentorships, and the lack of promotions were a reflection of why African American women did not receive a fair share of opportunities within their organization (Khosrovani & Ward, 2011). Cortina, Kabat-Farr, Leskinen, Huerta, and Magley (2013) wrote an article about modern discrimination in the workplace where sexism and racism are believed to be former types of discrimination. Cortina et al. ascertained that psychologists have identified modern discrimination based on race and gender.

Damaske (2011) conducted a qualitative study that focused on women's expectation in their career based on gender, race, and class. The study involved

examining women and their expectation of entry in the workforce. Damaske interviewed 80 women and found that African American women expected to work continually as adults. Gender, race, and class are what the women believed to be the bases of their level of pay (Damaske, 2011). Wagner (2014) evaluated an institute designed to create advancement career opportunities for African American women aiming for careers in academic disciplines in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM). Wagner focused on the percentage of professional STEM students who were African American, which was lower than the percentage of European Americans, and African American woman who hold senior executive positions was less than 1%. The leadership program used by the institution evaluated how the programs helped promote the careers of African American women (Wagner, 2014).

At a European American institution, African American women were negatively viewed when working (Hinton, 2010). The women marginalized this situation of inequality in the work environment. African American women who held executive positions within European American institutions believed these positions provided additional opportunities for promotion and upward mobility (Hinton, 2010). The basis of Hinton's article was a feminist theory to analyze the experiences of these women. Restifo, Roscigno and Qian (2013) presented a research study that showed apparent gaps that exist for women based on gender and race. The focus of the study was discrimination within organizations. The results indicated that discrimination affects women's ascent to upper management positions. African American women experienced a higher level of discrimination, especially regarding higher level positions (Restifo et al., 2013).

Women have equal rights because of the civil rights movement. Sked (2014) focused on the civil rights movement and evaluated how civil rights affected society. Although a vast deal of social change and equality occurred, Sked noted that the movement is shifting. Irby (2014) presented factors that constrain African American women's leadership opportunities in higher education. Irby ascertained that the basis of inequality in higher education practices is because of the lack of peer mentoring among African American women. Campaigns by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) highlighted the inequality of salaries for African American teachers (Kirk, 2012). Kirk explored legal strategies and the U.S. civil rights movements to focus on racial inequalities in the education system. Hamilton Houston and Thurgood Marshall were litigation lawyers who represented educators in the Little Rock, Arkansas, area. Brewer (2011) evaluated social transformation for African American women in relation to their career, income, and level of education and highlighted the improvement of status and class of African American women. As the enforcement of women's rights highlighted, women saw the evolution unfolding and society reflected change moving forward.

The focus of this research study was on African American women in senior executive positions and the inequalities they might have encountered. According to Kaba and Ward (2009), African American women contribute many skills and qualities to various industries, but the lack of opportunities limit their influence in many industries. Since the 1960s, the presence of African Americans in the U.S. political system increased substantially (Kaba & Ward, 2009). Since the 1980s, African Americans provided a

strong influence in the country's system. Kaba and Ward proposed that African American women's participation in the electoral process was highly effective and contributed a new perspective to the political system. Kaba (2012a) also noted that African American women between the ages of 25 and 29 earned more doctorate degrees than any other race in 2008-2009. Kaba reported that although African American women obtained more high-level degrees, the option of appointment to the U.S. Senate, Governor's Offices, and the U.S. Supreme Court did not grant an open invitation.

Kim (2011) ascertained that regardless of the university attended, African American students start their careers earning less than European American students do. Even if the college is a historically Black college or university or a historically White college, African American employees' salaries will still be lower than their counterparts' will (Kim, 2011). Kim also noted that African American women earned significantly less than men did. This phenomenon places African American women behind their competition from the start, which makes competing difficult on a senior executive level when already starting at a disadvantage.

Parlea-Buzatu (2011) compared the gap between rhetoric and the reality that African American women face regarding equal opportunities in organizations. The psychological perception of African American women in senior and leadership positions hinders African American women from career advancement. Parlea-Buzatu provided a literature review to support this concept and discussed the stereotypes that affect African Americans' professional and career development. Parlea-Buzatu stated that African American women are the largest minority group to receive higher education degrees but

still encounter barriers in the workplace. Negative stereotypes are damaging to professional African American women (Johnson &Thomas, 2012). African American women are generally viewed as support systems in the workplace in contrast to occupying a leadership position. Johnson and Thomas suggested that African American women seek guidance from mentors to become more proactive in their workplace. African American women are seen as unqualified based on their credibility, skills, and authority in the workplace (Parlea-Buzatu, 2011).

In 2014, African American Certified Public Accountants (CPA) had advanced in accounting positions, yet a low representation in other industries and services still exists as compared to their counterparts (Stewart, Wells, & Ross, 2011). Four of the 11% of the United States business graduates are African American men and women with careers in the leading accounting firms (Stewart et al., 2011). The American Institute of Certified Public Accountants (AICPA) committee members (as cited in Stewart et al., 2011) reported that of the partners at leading accounting firms, less than 1% were African American professionals. This research study was to explore equal opportunities and diversity in the work environment. Surveys and interviews conducted with African Americans in management within four accounting firms affirmed the disparity (Stewart et al., 2011). The objective of this research study was to explore the concept that the number of African Americans in a position to move into management may be lower without mentorship (Khosrovani & Ward, 2011). When African American women seek to advance in their careers, African American women search for additional opportunities and resources their accounting firm may not offer (Stewart et al., 2011).

More than 40% of African American women reported personnel evaluations are inaccurate and unfair (Khosrovani & Ward, 2011). Many staff level professionals feel that they are not receiving the personnel evaluations that their performance warranted. Nevertheless, formal personnel evaluations represent the official internal mechanism for compiling and communicating an individual professional performance reputation. In this context, an unfair and inaccurate evaluation would clearly limit the future promotion prospects of the junior level staff who received a less favorable supervisory assessment. More than 50% feel they do not receive assignments they need to advance (Khosrovani & Ward, 2011). The majority of respondents feel that they are not receiving the experiences that they will need to excel. This finding appears to reflect to cumulative impact of low CPA exam passage, lack of fruitful mentorship relationships, low performance evaluations, and isolation from their firm's key social networks. An assignment to the firms key jobs are hard to obtain if the professional is not certified, lacks an effective sponsor, lacks a reputation of high performance, and is isolated from their employers key internal networks.

Carter-Black (2008) shared personal experiences as a black woman and her journey in the white institution that she attended to obtain an education, and also established and maintained her career as a tenure-track assistant professor. In 1968, Carter-Black enrolled at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (Carter-Black, 2008). The university implemented an initiative that targeted minority, under-privileged African Americans students (Carter-Black, 2008). The name of the initiative was the Special Education Opportunities Program (SEOP), in which the goal was to recruit 500

economically challenged minority students, better known as Project 500 (Carter-Black, 2008). Carter-Black faced barriers as an African American student and faced just as many challenges as African American women seeking to establish and excel in their careers. Carter-Black continued to excel by obtaining a Bachelor degree and a Master's degree and became a faculty member at the University.

Although African American women embrace more opportunities, Malveaux (2013) explored the topic of African American women falling behind European American women in relationship to employment, income, and education. The disparity that African American women are still at the bottom of the income bracket remains puzzling. Malveaux found that European American women's average net worth is $42,600, whereas the net worth for African American women is $5. A gap in information exists to find a resolution to this inequality that African American women encounter.

Malveaux (2013) highlighted the African American individuals recognized by the media such as Oprah Winfrey, media mogul; Ursula Burns, first black woman CEO of a Fortune 500 corporation; and Michelle Obama, the First Lady of the United States of America. These examples demonstrate that while changes for African Americans in leadership positions show some progress, a gap still exists. According to National Partnership (2012), African American women earn 85 cents for every dollar earned by European American women. U.S. President Barack Obama implemented the Lily Ledbetter Fair Pay Act (2013), to address the inequality of the pay scale for women. Lilly Ledbetter, a woman who fought to close the salary gap between women and men, won a jury verdict in the U.S. Supreme Court, which the court overturned the ruling. President

Obama nullified the decision and signed a law, which is the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act (The Lily Ledbetter Fair Pay Act, 2013).

Loubert (2012) focused on the unemployment rate of African American women despite achieving higher levels of education and developing the skill sets to obtain leadership positions. Loubert discussed the unemployment ratio across the nation and the disparity that African American women face to receive a fair opportunity to build a successful career. Women make up nearly half of the payroll employment and their pay as compared to men has grown by 80% (Loubert, 2012). However, affirmative action and equal employment opportunity laws have ensured a positive change; there remains an unfairness in which salary is a concern for African American women. African American women who seek to excel in their careers experience issues from lack of opportunities, which is a different issue for African American women obtaining employment (Loubert, 2012). Research indicated that African Americans receive few opportunities and career benefits in corporate settings as compared to white males (Khosrovani & Ward, 2011). Women did not always have opportunities to work outside of the home. Women were *homemakers*, but statistics show that between 1980 and 2010, there was an increase of women that joined the work force (Loubert, 2012). The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2014) indicated that 59% of working-age women were in the labor force as of 2009, and only expects a 9% increase by 2018.

Hollar (2010) discussed the racial wealth gap in the United States. The median wealth is lower for African American and Hispanic women than the median wealth of European American women and men and African American men (Hollar, 2010). Hollar

stated that income is the most common measurement of wealth and inequality. A persons assets minus their debt reveals an even greater disparity for an individual. African American women have a zero or negative wealth ratio as compared to their white male counterparts; where their wealth ratio is $70,030. Hollar countered that suggestion by stating that this is not a solution to the problem of discrimination and structural barriers for African American women to increase their income and wealth in corporate America. Factors that hinder African American women from building wealth and building their careers are obtaining jobs that offer benefits such as paid sick days, health insurance, and retirement plans.

Leadership

As more women enter the labor force, women will seek to transition into leadership positions. Leadership is the interaction between leaders and followers and the influence the leader has on the followers (Hancock, 2012). Collins (2009) explored the development of the student's leadership skills before a student enters a professional field. Although an increase in women enrolled to enter the broadcasting industry exists, men seem to hold the positions of power (Collins, 2009). Even though Only 14.6% of the Chief Executive Offers (CEOs) in the United States are women, in which less than 5.3% of executive leaders in U.S. corporations are African American women (Warner, 2014).

Few African American women are in leadership positions in higher education (Irby, 2014). Irby experienced negativity regarding a pursuit of a career in the academia arena. The study included African American women in higher education who hold the positions of presidents, vice presidents, and provosts in universities and colleges across

the United States. Carnes and Radojevich-Kelly (2011) studied African American women who could not secure upper management positions and the steps that these women took to accelerate in their careers. African American female entrepreneurship increased because the women believed growth within their organization based on their experience and skills was not possible (Carnes & Radojevich-Kelly, 2011; Louis, 2012). The problem is that although women are in the workplace, African American women still fall behind men regarding representation in the top tiers of the American workforce (Carnes & Radojevich-Kelly, 2011).

Schools are different when employees are under the leadership of African American females as principals (Guramatunhu-Mudiwa & Bolt, 2012). Guramatunhu-Mudiwa and Bolt examined the assumptions made based on gender and race of women in leadership and executive positions. Guramatunhu-Mudiwa and Bolt discussed how the assumptions effect interactions with the students and the community in which African American females lead the school. Kelch, Smith, Johnson, Welkom, Gardner, and Collins (2013) examined different concepts that prohibited African American women from excelling as executives and leaders. Kelch et al.'s approach was from an African American feminist historic background and involved exploring forces that contributed to the lack of leadership development in African American women's careers. Kelch et al. analyzed historic research and case studies to examine three African American women deans at colleges and universities. The focus of the study was intelligence, the accomplishments, and the movement that these three educators possessed. The research

addressed three African American women deans' contributions to the universities in which the women were the dean and the community in which the deans served.

Sisters of the Academy (SOTA) (2011) are a leadership group that supports African American women who are on a tenure-track in academia (SOTA, 2011). Davis et al. (2011) focused on the women's productivity and strategies used during their careers. SOTA gives tenured African American women an opportunity to share the process to advancement in their careers and the promotion process. Davis et al. examined the issue of underrepresentation of African Americans and other minorities in higher education with the goal to seek resolution to this disparity. Evidence indicated that African American women have different experiences compared to European American counterparts (Davis et al., 2011).

African American challenges are race and gender in comparison to their European American colleagues. According to Montgomery, Dodson, and Johnson (2014) African American women has three main barriers to gain promotion and tenure in the academic arena; lack of socialization to faculty life, lack of meaningful mentoring, and inability to articulate a sustainable research agenda. Davis, Reynolds, and Jones (2011) suggested factors that may contribute to the success of African American women in academia: the completion of dissertation, consistent performance criteria and successful tenure and promotion. SOTA offers women a sounding board to share their lived experiences. Although a slight difference exists in the direct backgrounds of the women in the group, the perspective of how African American women view their career advancement process were remarkably similar (Davis et al., 2011). The African American women had similar

experiences with the struggles to advance their careers, balancing work-life responsibilities, and maintaining relationships such as companionship. Davis et al. stated that the women perceived their experiences as exacerbated by racist and sexist micro aggressions in the workplace.

Byrd (2009) presented a qualitative study on the experiences of African American women in U.S. organizations. Byrd evaluated how the women's race, gender, and social class affected their leadership role and examined the lived experiences of 10 African American women who held executive or senior-level management positions within their organization and how European Americans evaluated them. Byrd stated that the majority of the research on leadership was based on white men. There is limited research conducted on African American women in leadership roles in organizations. Byrd offered the main categories derived from the interviews with the 10 African American women: disempowering encounters, exclusion from the 'good ole boy' social network, being the only one (outsider), needing validation, and demythicizing stereotypical images. Byrd stated that even when in a leadership position, African American women are still undermined.

The results indicated the acknowledgement of African American women as leaders once approved by the European Americans. The women of this study agreed that once their leadership ability was accepted over extended time, they were better supported as leaders in their organizations. Byrd (2009) stated that their peers first had to look beyond their physical appearance of being a leader as African American women seeking leadership opportunities that were normally occupied by White men. Byrd offered

suggestions on how African American women can become successful without believing their restrictions such as working to break the concrete ceiling by joining the networks and seeking a mentor to guide their careers.

Byrd (2014) ascertained that working in a leadership position is an authoritative role that includes a certain amount of power or influence within an organization. Predominantly European Americans hold these types of positions (Byrd, 2014). Byrd highlighted that African American women believed to be restricted from leadership positions based on their gender, race, and social class. European Americans undermine African Americans women in leadership positions in the workplace. Byrd stated that European Americans use their privileges to overrule and control the actions of African Americans in the workplace. Although the numbers of African American women leaders in predominantly European American organizations is increasing, there is still a disparity and may serve the disempowerment of the process to leadership for African American women.

Crewe examined the life of Height, who is chair and president emeritus of the National Council of Negro Women. Height earned 20 honorary degrees and received more than 50 awards, including the Presidential Medal of Freedom. Eliminating sexism and racism were Height's focus points (Crewe, 2009). Height's memoir, *Open Wide the Freedom Gates*, included a discussion on leadership roles and contained advice to African American women. Height discussed how African American women in leadership must not lose sight of their objective to develop lasting institutions and programs that will help them to achieve their goals. Height suggested that African American women create

programs that will ensure a positive outcome to the leadership barriers that was faced by women. Crewe stated that she expressed the need for African American leaders to avoid the negative and divisive dialogue with and about each other. Research indicated the participation of women on a board of directors produced positive effects (Nielsen & Nielsen, 2013). The women on the boards added different leadership styles that seemed to decrease conflict and created operational needs that assisted in developing the board's objectives (Nielsen & Nielsen, 2013).

Mentoring

Mentoring is a resource that can be beneficial to the success of someone building his or her career (Garvey, Stokes, & Megginson, 2014). Garvey et al. highlighted the variety of purposes of a mentor to include the development of managers or leaders, change of positions in the workplace, to promote people to senior positions, support change, and improve performance. Montgomery et al. (2014) presented an article in reference to ideas and processes they used while mentoring women who were graduate students and junior faculty of color. Professionally, our society reinforces self-promotion, competitive personal ambition and individual career advance (Montgomery et al., 2014). Montgomery et al. stated that the majority of mentoring theories suggest individuals prepare themselves for personal advancement at the beginning of their career and gain without other alternative. However, Montgomery et al. suggested mentoring for career sustainability throughout ones entire career. Mentors generally introduce their mentee(s) to people, attitudes, places, and opportunities that are pivotal key factors to creating a sustainable career and building the mentors network of people. Mentors could be used to

encourage ethnic minority and disadvantaged groups as well as support women to break through the glass ceiling (Garvey et al., 2014).

Mentors have authority to suggest changes in a person's attitude, thinking, behavior, and performance, and to help develop various skills in mentees. Mentors highlight learning gaps for mentees as well as offer networking opportunities into larger networks, increase knowledge, and add to leadership abilities (Garvey et al., 2014). To improve the learning gap for a mentee, a mentor would develop particular skill sets in the mentee needed to perform at a high level in the mentee's current position. Garvey et al. (2014) highlighted the benefits of having a mentor: the mentee would build self-confidence and willingness to take risk in the workplace, developing independence and maturity in the workplace, and developing the ability to accept criticism and use it for the betterment of their career development.

African American women could benefit from using a mentor to help guide them through their career and provide insight into different strategies to progress to higher levels of leadership through the workplace. African American women should seek mentors that can provide experience and objectivity to the development of their career. Garvey et al. (2014) stated characteristics of a good mentor are that they want to be a mentor, they are non-judgmental, good listeners, honest, gives thorough feedback, has good interpersonal skills, and are reliable and sincere.

Grant (2012) used a qualitative research study to evaluate the effect of traditional mentoring on African American females who obtained a doctoral degree. Results indicated that mentoring is an exceptional component that assists in the success of

African American women within their careers; however, additional strategies were needed for them to excel in predominantly White institutions (PWI). Grant suggested same-sex, same-race mentoring might enhance career opportunities for African American women in PWIs. The experience of African American women working in PWIs may provide upcoming leaders insight on opportunities such as faculty positions, upper management positions, or senior executive positions (Grant, 2012). Grant noted that African American women who were in mentoring programs in professional and graduate school settings excelled based on the mentoring relationship. African American women and their mentors shared cultural experiences, and Grant suggested that mentors could help advance mentees careers based on characteristics similar to parenting.

Haizlip (2012) discussed the strategies that African American students could benefit from by interacting with a mentor. Universities should offer programs to encourage African American students to seek career opportunities as counseling educators and psychology faculty. Despite the efforts of affirmative action and anti-discrimination legislation, counseling and psychology programs have challenges in finding and hiring African American women Faculty (Haizlip, 2012). The results of the study were to increase the numbers of African American women in these positions; in which the implementation of a mentorship program occurs to ensure change in this disparity (Haizlip, 2012). One significant program created to mentor graduate students on a national, regional, and local level is The Holmes Scholars Network (HSN). This program was designed to assist African American women seeking career opportunities in academia. The main objective of the program is to mentor African American women into

their careers as successful faculty members and they become mentors to other aspiring African American women in the program.

Henderson, Hunter, and Hildreth (2010) supported from a black feminist theory perspective. The African American women faculty identified inequalities even though their credentials and expertise were equal to their counterparts (Henderson et al., 2010). Henderson et al. stated that through their experiences, they have witnessed barriers because of their race and gender in their tenure and promotion process, in organizational barriers and the inability to build positive professional relationships.

Hendson et al. (2010) discussed the quality of mentorship for African American women and provided framework of the tension and resistance areas African American women endure. The mammy-sapphire continuum of existence is the images that African American women are seen as in the United States. "Mammy" seen as the matriarch or helper and "Sapphire" is the unintelligent and angry Black woman. Henderson et al. stated this external definition represents African American women in the academia and often prohibits them from ascending to faculty positions. As mentors, African American women could give their mentees insight into the barriers they faced, how to push through the resistance the women may have endured, and what strategies they used to advance their career (Henderson et al., 2010). Henderson et al. suggested peer and group mentoring where individuals hold the functions of both mentor and mentee. Group mentoring offers African American women the opportunity to discuss the reality of racism and sexism in their careers and share their knowledge and expertise to enhance their network.

Horsford and Brown II (2011) presented an article regarding leaders in schools, colleges, and universities. Academia is an area in which African American women are leaders and the level of resources provided as compared to areas which European American women are leaders is dismal (Horsford & Brown II, 2011). When African American women experience limited resources, the results are a reflection on the success of the students (Horsford & Brown II, 2011). Horsford and Brown II suggested creating concepts to close the gaps and equalize the disparity so that students can receive the same level of education.

Mentoring is highly suggested to students whether through formal or informal programs. Mentoring relationships could be short term, long term, structured, plan, or spontaneous (Horsford & Brown II, 2011). Horsford and Brown II posited how effective the utilization of professional leadership preparation programs are for students seeking to become leaders in the future.

Diversity

Diversity in the workplace is important to an organization. Diversity programs are in position in organizations to ensure equality, fairness, and opportunities for all races and gender. Buttner, Lowe, and Billings-Harris (2012) focused on employees of color in U.S. organizations and the causes and effects of the underrepresentation of African American leaders. Buttner et al. discussed the importance of strategic diversity initiatives in organizations. Since the early 1980s, European Americans seemed to eliminate negative stereotypes of African Americans (Buttner et al., 2012). European Americans endorsed qualified African American leaders, and supported the idea of equal

opportunity, but racism exists (Buttner et al., 2012). Blatant racism may not exist, but theories such as aversive racism and the modern racism theory, indicated that discrimination does exists (Buttner et al., 2012). According to Grant (2012), the numbers of African American women who are administrators or who have leadership roles within predominantly White American institutions suggested the opportunities are not available to African American women. Grant provided an overview of racism in academia, and the legal issues that African American women faced. Grant offered suggestions that might assist to improve the racism issue for African American women.

Kaba (2012a) highlighted the 100 most influential young African Americans aged 25-45 in 2011, and examined variables such as birthplace, age, universities, and the positions African American women held. Individuals 40 or younger appeared to have more opportunities than the older generation regardless of race or gender (Kaba, 2012a). Guillaume and Pochic (2009) wrote an article based on research, statistics, and interviews with 60 senior managers on the topic of diversity and women's ascent to senior management positions. Some of the obstacles women faced in their careers were the glass ceiling effect, social and cultural barriers, as well as an organization's perspective of women in senior management positions (Guillaume & Pochic, 2009). Wolfe and Dilworth (2014) analyzed the occupational authority between men and women in higher education based on ethnicity, race, and gender. Wolfe and Dilworth examined the historical factors that are prohibiting African American women from leadership positions in higher education. Wolfe and Dilworth determined that positions such as Administrators in higher education were considered whiteness property positions.

Leaders of corporations in America face challenges with diversity management (Berrey, 2014). The focus of Berrey's study was to highlight the outcome that African American women and other minorities overcome when their equal opportunities face jeopardy. Berrey presented a study about African American and European American women to obtain their perspective of diversity issues in the workplace, to obtain an understanding to this phenomenon, and to seek resolution.

A shortage of African American faculty members in the academia arena exist and this disparity exist in the work environment as well. Berrey (2014) proposed that African American women faced racial and gender barriers. African American women were recognized based on race and gender, which made advancing in their careers difficult (Berrey, 2014).
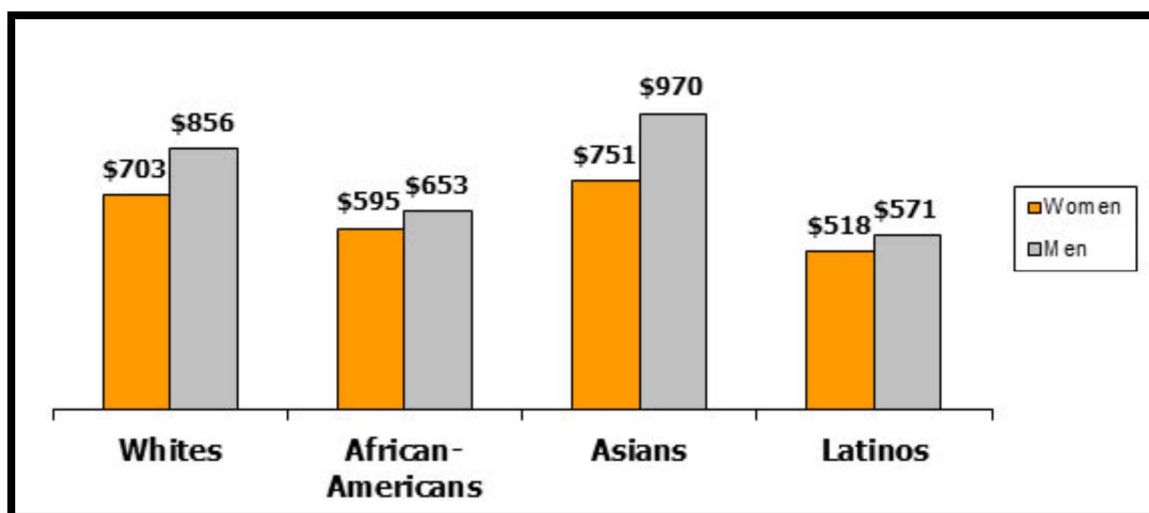
Figure 1. 2011 women and men weekly earnings based on gender and race. From Catalyst (2014) 2011-Women and Men weekly earning based on gender and race.

Cocciara, Kwesiga, Bell, and Baruch (2010) evaluated female Master of Business Administration (MBA) graduates and their success in advancing their careers after

graduation. The research study included 318 MBA alumni from the United States, equally divided between females and males (Cocciara et al., 2010). Women, when compared to men, reported a lower salary gain and less opportunity for upper mobility in their careers (Cocciara et al., 2010). Despite higher education increasing for women, a large pay gap still exists between men and women, and may start as early as one year out of college (Cocciara et al., 2010).

Table 1

Illustrates Women and Men Earnings Based on Their Degree

Degree	Women Median weekly	Men Median weekly earnings
Doctoral	**$1,352**	**$1,686**
Professional	$1,362	$1,881
Master's	$1,127	$1,488
Bachelor's	$909	$1,188
Associate's	$677	$886
High school	$543	$710

Glass Ceiling Effect

African American women seeking to excel in their careers face the glass ceiling effect, which is the invisible ceiling or plateau that prohibits women from moving further in their careers (Bolat, Bolat, & Kihc, 2011). African American women do not receive the opportunities offered to their European counterparts, and this outcome causes African American women not to excel to the next level in their careers (Bolat et al., 2011). Bolat et al. analyzed masculinity and the effects to women careers. Bolat et al. discussed the correlation between career self-efficacy and the glass ceiling. One hundred eighty six women completed a questionnaire to determine their level of masculinity and their views

on the glass ceiling. Women with high masculinity appeared to experience no negativity related to the glass ceiling effect and the advancement of their career (Bolat et al., 2011). Women with low masculinity appeared to experience negativity related to the glass ceiling effect and the advancement of their career (Bolat et al., 2011).

Pompper (2011) examined professional African American women in the United States in upper management positions and discussed how age, ethnicity, and gender affected them when confronted with the glass ceiling. Organizational glass ceilings remain impenetrable, but women of color are optimistic that the benefits of a diverse upper-level management may create change (Key et al., 2012; Pompper, 2011). Pompper discussed the goals and objectives of the Civil Rights movements and the lack of achievement based on the current number of African American women CEOs and members of boards of directors. African American women that are at a midlife-age have an additional barrier of age discrimination in the workplace. Midlife-age African American women are discontent in their careers and face the glass ceiling with little hope of excelling based their exposure and salary (Pompper, 2012).

Jackson, Callaghan, and Adseria (2014) analyzed the *glass ceiling effect* and the effected African American women since the 1990s in higher education and corporate America. Jackson et al. focused on the barriers that African American women and men encountered seeking ascension to senior level positions such as chief executive officers, presidents, and vice presidents. Jackson et al. discussed three discriminatory practices in the workplace for African American women: a lack of skills and qualities required for a leadership position, overt discrimination by the majority culture, and systemic

discrimination on behalf of the organization against African American women. There is also a notion of tokenism. Where organizations uplift and excel an individual or a small group of African Americans, this is to fulfill the diversity requirements to make it appear that the organization practices equal opportunities.

A program called Strategic Health Authorities (SHA) exists to assist African American women and other minority nurses striving to reach senior executive levels in the health care industry facing the glass ceiling effect (Wright, 2012). Wright insisted that SHAs offered intensive courses that did not target staff from black and minority ethnic (BME) backgrounds. The designed courses were to develop the nurses' leadership skills and abilities to enable them to excel to the next level of their careers (Wright, 2012).

The United States Federal Glass Ceiling Commission and the glass ceiling effect became a visual concept in 1987 that illustrates the discriminations of African American women; hindering them from achieving senior executive levels positions in organizations (Bendle & Schmidt, 2013). Bendle and Schmidt ascertained that the glass ceiling effect was in the past, but proposed to offer a new metaphor, *Firewalls,* for the discrimination that still existed against African American women seeking senior executive positions in society in 2012. With changes made, The Catalyst (2014) indicated that disadvantages and underrepresentation in senior executive position by African American women still existed. By creating a new metaphor for the glass ceiling effect, Bendle and Schmidt noted that the new metaphor will play a heuristic role in the organization and viewing of this phenomenon and the actions that need to take place to improve the disparity. New heuristic roles in organizations offer new perspectives for understanding of the firewalls.

Bendle and Schmidt presented the idea that a firewall classifies African American women as outsiders and prohibits them from entering into upper management positions. Firewalls, as used in information technology terms, is a virtual wall that denies access to outsiders, as the insiders regard as not belonging to the system (Bendle & Schmidt, 2013). Von Bertalanffy noted that everything in the environment interacts so that systems and people align together to create a positive working environment.

Smith, Caputi, and Crittenden (2012) measured how the glass ceiling effect affected African American women in the choices made to advance their careers. The approach was to obtain information from 258 women working in organizations and analyze their beliefs on happiness, psyche, work engagement, career satisfaction, and physical health (Smith et al., 2012). Smith et al. used the Career Pathways Survey (CPS) to measure the responses from the women. The outcome beliefs to the CPS were acceptance, resilience, resignation, and denial (Smith et al., 2012).

Obstacles exist that cause African American women to believe the effects of the invisible glass ceiling in their careers (Smith et al., 2012). Smith et al. ascertained a need for further investigation of this phenomenon. Smith et al. created the CPS system to evaluate what women's thoughts were in reference to the glass ceiling. Resilience belief in the CPS described a woman who continued to advance her career until she breaks the glass ceiling (Smith et al., 2012). Resignation belief described a woman who believes that additional barriers exist for women than for men to advance in their careers (Smith et al., 2012). The thought of attempting to break the glass ceiling may become overwhelming (Smith et al., 2012). Denial belief described a woman who believes that men and women

face the same obstacles to excel in their careers, and the glass ceiling effect does not exist (Smith et al., 2012). The objective of the research study presented by Smith et al. was to explore how women perceived the glass ceiling effect and sought to determine the resolution required to correct this issue (Smith et al., 2012).

The glass ceiling exists for both African American women and European American women, but European American women can see through the glass ceiling and advance their careers with less adversity (Edmondson, 2012). African American women face discrimination barriers, gender obstacles, and overcome cultural misunderstandings before obtaining the same opportunities as their European counterparts (Edmondson, 2012). African American women face bicultural life experiences in which their personal and work personalities are different (Edmondson, 2012). The different personalities create stressors that do not allow African American women the opportunity to be themselves at work. African American women's directness can be misconstrued as negative; and have a negative outcome whereas if these were the characteristic of a European American man or woman, the consideration would be a positive attribute (Edmondson, 2012).

According to the Chronicle of Higher Education (2008), only 22% of full-time faculty members in the United States were African American women. An underrepresentation of African American women in this career field exists and the disparity continues to grow (Edmondson, 2012). Edmondson suggested that African American women who worked in predominantly White institutes (PWIs) feared to speak up about their experiences because of retaliation. Diversity programs would assist PWIs

to create a balanced working environment for their faculty as well as creating an equal opportunity environment (Edmondson, 2012).

A disparity exists in higher education for African American women (Jackson & O'Callaghan, 2011). Jackson and O'Callaghan suggested that research is available back to 1993, but only a percentage of the research was about the glass ceiling effect. Research regarding African American women in senior management positions suggested less advancement rates, barriers that place limitations on African American employees, and gaps in salary wages (Jackson & O'Callaghan, 2011). Jackson and O'Callaghan suggested that this phenomenon is based on the gender gap and not the racial barriers that prohibit African American women from excelling in their careers. The goal of the research was to highlight the factors that prohibit African American women from advancing their careers in the academia workplace. African American women are not given the proper salaries, lack the potential for promotions, and are not given certain levels of responsibility that might catapult them into senior level positions (Jackson & O'Callaghan, 2011). Jackson and O'Callaghan suggested mentoring and support networks are vitally important as African Americans enter the work force along with early career socialization with African Americans currently in senior level positions.

The African American women discussed how difficult advancing in their careers can prohibit them from CEO positions. The women discussed the type of organizations that hire women for upper management positions, and how the number of female CEOs will increase in the future (Vieito, 2012). The CEO position is male dominated and has not been an open opportunity for females (Buckalew, Konstantinopoulos, Russell, & El-

Sherbini, 2012). Buckalew et al. suggested that women are better at leading than men. Vieito stated that organizations ran by female CEOs perform better than male CEOs in small, medium, and large companies. However, the number of women CEOs is limited (Vieito, 2012).

Buckalew et al. (2012) indicated that women are transformational leaders versus men are transactional leaders. Another barrier for women is the work and family dynamic that plays a role to be successful in their careers (Buckalew et al., 2012). Wayne, Lemmon and Wilson (2013) suggested that even if a female is obligated to a career and family, upper management will still view this as a conflict and will not allow a female to advance based on their personal feelings (Wayne et al., 2013). Kranc (2013) presented an article on the book *Lean In* written by Facebook Inc. Chief Operating Officer, Sandberg. Lean In is a book that touches on topics such as women progressing in their careers and the process of moving up in the corporate (Kranc, 2013) Sandberg (2013) stated that women hold themselves back and resolve that women must change their behavior to experience change; however even once discovered, the numbers are still not increasing in senior executive positions. Kranc posited that 12.6% of women sit on boards of directors in the U.S. whereas in European countries such as Norway has 36.3%, Finland has 26.4%, Sweden has 26.4%, and France has 16.6% that sit on boards of directors. Sandberg suggested that change must start on the board level of directors. A more diversified board of directors and discussions about equal opportunities must start there to ensure change at the senior executive level position. Policies implemented in other

countries to ensure change and that women represent senior executive positions (Kranc, 2013).

Schuh et al. (2014) provided research about women in leadership positions and the reason for the underrepresentation in senior positions. The goal of the study was to inform measures targeted of women in senior leadership positions and evaluate the reasons for the inequality. Schuh et al. proposed that the underrepresentation of women in senior leadership positions was an ethical challenge to society and for the business world as well. I created new theories and practices that could contribute to opportunities for women to transition higher-level positions. Schuh et al. proposed that power motivation theories indicate that motivation is lower in women than men are. Gender, power, motivation, and leadership role occupancy are determinants to accession for women (Shuh et al. 2014).

Work–Life Balance

Traditionally, women have been the caregivers of their families and are considered the nurturers and the men as the breadwinners that go out to work and support the family (Sundaresan, 2014). However, the nature of the work force has transitioned and the number of women in the work force has increased. Women assume the role of two full time jobs – one at home and the other at the office (Sundaresan, 2014). Statistics indicated that although women are interested in career advancement, women possess a desire to achieve a work life balance outside their career in comparison to male counterparts (Madsen, 2012). College educated women have a decision to make when their options include creating a family and focusing on their career (Bijawat, 2013).

Bijawat discussed European American and African American college-educated women perspectives regarding which role is more valuable to them - a career or a family. The results reflected that career women of both races who had families looked to their husbands to assist with the household and raising the children equally. Guillaume and Pochic discussed work-life balance and creating a successful career and presented the question, what would you sacrifice to ascent to a top management position? Women argued that paid and unpaid jobs needed evaluation regarding the discussion of the barriers faced when seeking senior management positions and positions of higher authority (Guillaume & Pochic, 2009).

Sundaresan (2014) presented a study to discuss the factors affecting work life balance for women across various industries. Sundaresan obtained 125 questionnaires from working women about their work life balance and the results were that the majority of the women experience difficulty balancing work and family due to excessive pressure from work, no personal time, and always taking caring of others. Because of poor work life balance, women experience high levels of anxiety and stress, dysfunction at home and inability to fulfill their full potential (Sundaresan, 2014). To work in an executive role is time consuming and when working in a position of power, other facets of life may suffer such as family, relationships, and hobbies.

Sundaresan (2014) suggested two solutions for women that might enhance their work life balance: the role analysis model and three-factor model. Both models were created to give working women a guideline to maintain a healthier life both professionally and personally. The role analysis model is where you analyze both roles: at

work and at home. There is usually an imbalance in work life because of the overload of family life or role interference with work life. Role analysis model analyzes each role and how to eliminate certain task to create a balance for the working woman. The three-factor model is based on knowledge, skills, and behavior. By maintaining a healthy work life balance based on these contributing factors, this might assist the women to balance all avenues of life.

Tajlili (2014) discussed work life integration and the conflict it has on family life for women. Career counselors are not informing female college students of the realities of having a career and a family. Tajlili stated that counselors are giving the female students the concept of "having it all" is attainable. Blending the Kaleidoscope Career Model (KCM) and the Systems Theory Framework (STF) was a proposed solution to understand the personal influences, the environment, and how society can help work life integration for women. Both models are about career development and being able to live a fulfilling life. KCM focuses on balance, authenticity, and challenges that are vital to creating a fulfilling lifestyle and STF focuses on the contextual and relational aspect of women's careers (Tajlili, 2014). With the two models integrated, a persuasion exists for women to make career decisions that promote career life integration.

Faith and Spirituality

African American women used faith and spirituality to cope with struggles and overcome obstacles (Lyons, 2013). Lyons focused on African American women who worked in European American organizations and how their religion helped them during their career advancement. Lyons provided the women an opportunity to share their lived

experiences to add to the study. The African American women shared obstacles such as inequality, unfairness, and not receiving opportunities to excel in their careers. Lyon ascertained that faith and spirituality are not perspectives viewed as a contribution to the progression of African American women and their careers. However, spirituality has been guiding forces in many lives of African American women seeking senior executive level positions.

Lyons (2013) discussed the work environment that African American women endure when entering a predominantly White organization in a senior executive role. The environment is usually hostile, stressful, and alienated from networks and peers. African American women use their faith and spirituality to gain strength to endure such experiences that come from race and gender discrimination (Lyons, 2013). African American women have used their faith to stand strong against adversities in the workplace and have excelled to become effective leaders in various professions and occupations (Catalyst, 2014).

Social and Cultural Barriers Faced When Seeking Senior Management Positions

Wyatt and Silvester (2015) highlighted the difficulty African Americans have when attempting to reach a senior management position and evaluated the journey to a leadership position of African Americans versus the journey for European Americans. Semistructured interviews were done with 20 African Americans and 20 European Americans that were senior managers. Wyatt and Silvester identified common themes in the progress to a leadership role in both groups: development, networks, visibility, and

line manger support. The difference for African Americans was how they processed the barriers that were prohibiting them from career progression.

Visibility was very important for both African Americans and European Americans managers. African Americans stated that the need to be placed in roles that were more prestigious ensured opportunities for positive exposure versus job roles that were less highly regarded. Wyatt and Silvester (2015) stated that not having a strong informal network is a significant barrier to the progression into a senior management position. Creating informal networks are typically done in the culture or society in which you live and partake in outside of the workplace. African Americans reported that development was a sure path to career progression but suggested that the barrier of not having the proper network prohibited the skills that were developed. Wyatt and Silvester discussed the importance of having the support of the line manager, or what the African Americans refer to as, *the gatekeeper*. Line managers have the power of access to career progression. African Americans suggested that line managers might show favoritism to European Americans when situations occur to be introduced to senior decision makers or someone who could promote their career to the next level. African Americans might progress faster if they adopt formal processes as well as informal processes to their career development (Wyatt & Silvester, 2015). Informal processes were building informal networks, mentors, and informal relationships with senior executives.

STEM

Initiatives created and implemented at the state and federal level to increase representation of minorities in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics are not

producing the predicted outcome (Flowers, 2012). According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2012), African Americans only earned 12.9% Associate degrees, 9.5% Bachelor degrees, 10.7% Master degrees, 6.5% Doctoral degrees, and 7.1% professional degrees in STEM fields. Whereas for the, European Americans earned 66.4% Associate degrees, 71.5% Bachelor degrees, 64.6% Master degrees, 58.6% Doctoral degrees, and 71.1% professional degrees in STEM fields (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). The initiative is for the program to increase the number of African Americans partaking in STEM education and careers are not excelling (Flowers, 2012). Underrepresentation of African American women is throughout various industries, but Flowers focused on the underrepresentation in STEM disciplines.

Although diversity increased on different levels and across most industries, a lack of representation exists of African American women in the STEM programs in universities and in the workplace. The STEM program is not sought after by African American women but might be an avenue to maneuvering into careers in which they can excel to senior executive roles. Malcom and Malcom (2011) discussed the status of African American women in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields and provided a personal perspective of Malcom's advancement over 35 years. The focus was on increasing diversity in STEM education and careers. Malcom and Malcom evaluated the advancement in the careers of individuals in the STEM industry for the next generation to follow. Both individuals described how to help minority women enter the STEM fields and the paths to take to advance in their careers (Malcom & Malcom, 2011). Malcom and Malcom (2011) suggested the establishment of a mentor-protégé

relationship to introduce the big idea, systems of rewards, the culture, codes of conducts and traditions.

Academia and Higher Education

Sisters of the Academy (SOTA) (2011) are a leadership group that supports African American women who are on a tenure-track in academia (SOTA, 2011). Davis et al. (2011) focused on the women's productivity and strategies used during their careers. SOTA gives tenured African American women an opportunity to share the process to advancement in their careers and the promotion process. Davis et al. examined the issue of underrepresentation of African Americans and other minorities in higher education with the goal to seek resolution to this disparity. Evidence indicated that African American women have different experiences compared to European American counterparts (Davis et al., 2011).

The advancement of African American women's careers in higher education may reflect their race and gender instead of their skills, education, experience, and the ability of an individual (Jackson, Callaghan & Adseria, 2014). Jackson et al. reviewed 66 documents to add validation to the theoretical view regarding the glass ceiling effects in higher education. In the 1980s, the U.S. Federal Government addressed the glass ceiling effect and extended resources in the United States to evaluate and analyze the concerns of inequality in the workforce (Jackson et al., 2014). Organizations such as the U.S. Department of Labor and the Federal Glass Ceiling Commission investigated and sought resolution to make the inequalities less and provide everyone with equal opportunities (Jackson, 2014).

Green (2008) conducted research about African American women in leadership and executive roles within higher education. Green focused on women of color and their experiences when working in community colleges and shared personal experiences from her career and her path to college presidency. Green highlighted different areas that women may want to consider in the ascent of their careers and noted that she encountered double challenges because of race and gender. Green's ability to perform was questioned often because she was an African American woman and a mother. However, Green earned her bachelor of business administration, a master of arts in business education, and a doctor of philosophy in higher education administration.

Green (2008) stated that education was very important in the advancement of her career and she gained her Ph.D. because she wanted to progress further and eliminate perceived obstacles. A terminal degree helped to ensure Green's credibility amongst her peers. Green stated she was recognized as a hard worker that was able to effectively lead a large academic unit, capable of facing personnel challenges, inspired planning, and influenced collegiality. Green focused on the amount of hard work, patience, tenacity and perseverance one must have upon operating in a leadership role. The leadership role is a perceived position of power, control, and grandeur. Green stated that one must be able to model, coach, engage, inspire, and influence. Green suggested mentors for aspiring leaders in academia. Green had three male mentors that helped to guide her career to the position of provost.

Behar-Horenstein, West-Olatunji, Moore, Houchen, and Roberts (2012) presented a study to discuss the pre-tenure experiences of African American women faculty

members in predominantly White institutions. One factor of discrimination that exists in academia is racist ideologies and racially discriminatory behaviors. Other factors included (a) lack of opportunities, (b) lack of or little mentoring opportunities, (c) unspoken rules by authority figures and (d) more harshly judged on their work performance as compared to their European American counterparts (Behar-Horenstein et al., 2012). These obstacles place a strain on African American women to build successful careers and to excel to the next level of leadership (Behar-Horenstein et al., 2012). Mentoring is the most effective method in alleviating racial barriers for tenure and junior faculty in academia (Behar-Horenstei et al., 2012). Most leaders value mentoring for both men and women but stress the critical dilemma for African American women faculty and the development of their careers. African American women that had a mentor experienced an increase in job satisfaction, gained upward mobility and increased salaries (Behar-Horenstei et al., 2012). The absence of mentoring and development leaves junior African American faculty in a position where it is difficult to excel.

Madsen (2012) explored the issues of African American women not receiving equal opportunities to find a solution to the problem. As the phenomenon of a low percentage of African American women in senior executive positions continues throughout the United States, Madsen suggested a need to develop more African American women leaders in the academia arena. From 1970 until 2012, women made progress in their careers in higher education (Madsen, 2012). According to Madsen, since 1980, the enrollment rate for women in undergraduate and graduate programs increased. The percentages increased for female faculty, as well.

Since 1975, female associate professors increased from 17% to 38% and female full professors increased from 10% to 24% (Madsen, 2012). The percent of women that hold titles such as president is 23% of colleges and universities across the United States (Madsen, 2012). Although an increase occurred since the 1980s, a salary gap still exists for women as compared to their male counterparts. Women's salaries decreased from 83% of what male faculty earns to 82% since 1972 (Madsen, 2012). Madsen presented results from a McKinsey & Co. survey that stated that women lose interest faster than men do to move to higher professional levels do, and women are less interested in advancing in their career as their family grows. Madsen (2012) suggested obtaining a mentor to enhance career development, create a strategy for career management, and maintain work life balance.

Cook and Glass (2014) investigated policy and procedures in universities that measured gender equality, as well as factors that affect African American women and noted that a direct relationship exists between diversity policies that are measured and the reduction of the glass ceiling effect. The percentage of men who hold higher authority positions and higher paying jobs outweigh women in universities (Cook & Glass, 2014). To resolve the inequality, Cook and Glass concluded that organizations and human resources managers should implement and enforce the policies and procedures to measure the primary factors that cause the inequalities.

Transition and Summary

The purpose of Section 1 was to provide a discussion of an issue that many African American women face during their careers, and the methods used to seek

resolution. Pursuing a career as an executive takes drive, passion, education, knowledge, and expertise (Byrd, 2009). Although African American women possess these characteristics, attaining an executive position is still a challenge in industries (Byrd, 2009). African American women face obstacles to start a career and excel, but experience problems in their attempt to transition to the senior management level. This doctoral research study included viewing and discussing what challenges African American women faced and the strategies used to reach their level of success. Section 1 included the foundation of the study, background of the problem, problem statement, purpose statement, research questions, assumptions, limitations, and delimitations. The information provided in Section 2 includes the qualitative study on the participants and the methods selected to conduct the study.

Section 2: The Project

Section 2 includes a discussion about the research design and the role of a researcher. This section includes a description of the participants, the research method, the population and sampling, the data collection technique, and the organization of the data. The research validated the study by introducing the reliability and validity of the research conducted. Reliability tests a method or theory more than once, evaluating whether the outcome is the same each time (Bernard, 2013). This qualitative study consisted of an interview of 20 African American women in senior executive positions in corporations and the academic arena in the southeastern region of the United States who provided their lived experiences to enhance this doctoral research study. Sinkovics and Alfoldi (2012) suggested that the business community once recognized qualitative research to be nonlinear and unpredictable, but many researchers have presented it as a grounded and reliable research method (Sinkovics & Alfoldi, 2012). History has indicated that racial and sexual discrimination toward African American women may exist and that discrimination may have still existed in 2012 (Akee & Yuksel, 2012).

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the experiences of African American women and the lack of diversity and equal opportunities in the workplace that prohibits them from advancing to executive leadership roles in their careers. A successful career is a goal that a person strives toward over the course of time (Byrd, 2009). African American women who seek senior executive positions should have the same opportunity to be successful in their careers.

This doctoral research study involved obtaining data from face-to-face and phone interviews with 20 African American women in senior executive positions, in corporations in the United States, and the academic arena. The geographic area of the study was in the southeastern region of the United States. The data from the study may influence social change by better preparing opportunities for African American women to enter into a senior executive level position. The implications for positive social change include the potential to influence organizational leaders to review the culture and diversity in the workplace, provide mentorship programs, and evaluate who may advance to senior management positions.

Role of the Researcher

My role was to identify 20 African American women who held senior executive positions in various businesses and industries. I obtained their viewpoints on goals, barriers, and accomplishments in their careers. The interviews conducted with African American women in higher level positions presented the strategies used to reach a senior executive level position. The coding and analyses of the data from this doctoral research study could enhance the outcomes and findings. The discoveries could influence social change and may be helpful to African American women who are still aspiring to reach senior executive level management positions.

As an African American woman striving for a senior executive position, I was able to relate to and understand some of the obstacles that these women faced. The information that the participants shared was valuable to the understanding of their obstacles and offered insight for African American women who may be leaders one day.

This phenomenon was based on African American women and the barriers they overcame to ascend to senior executive level positions. I sought to add information to enhance the opportunities to address the issues of inequality, the benefit of mentors in the workplace, and the disparity African American women have to overcome to attain senior level positions.

Participants

The participants were 20 African American women who held senior executive positions in the southeastern region of the United States in various corporations and academia, which included women who worked in newsrooms, radio stations, marketing firms, the telecommunications industry, food services, and academia. The participants included African American women in my social network and referrals by the participants. The participants answered a series of questions that gathered their viewpoints on their industry, their paths to success, and the struggles faced to reach their senior executive positions (see Appendix A). Participants offered their lived experiences and the strategies they implemented to reach a senior executive level management position. The participants highlighted obstacles and gave insight into how they arrived in their current leadership positions.

The snowball sampling method is a segment of purposeful sampling (Walker, 2012). Snowball sampling better suited the needs of this research study. When the hidden population of interest is unreachable, snowball sampling is a recommended approach (Lund Research, 2010). Few African American women hold senior executive positions; snowball sampling provided the opportunity to meet the needs of this research study.

Snowball sampling allowed the African American women to include other African

American women in similar positions such as themselves for this doctoral research study.

Saturation is a method used to ensure that adequate and quality data support the research

(Walker, 2012). Walker stated that as a researcher collects data, he or she reaches a point

in the research in which the data do not lead to additional information. Jette, Grover, and

Keck (2003) suggested that expertise in the chosen topic could reduce the number of

participants needed in a study. Saturation occurred based on 20 participants because of

the lack of new information collected during the collection process. Walker stated that the

concept of saturation occurred when no new data are generated through additional

interviews. Walker noted that snowball sampling relies on the dynamics of natural and

organic social networks. Prior to agreeing to participate in the interview, the participants

received a consent form to complete to confirm confidentiality (see Appendix C).

Research Method and Design

The focus of this qualitative research study involved conducting interviews with

African American women who had careers in senior executive positions. Denzin (2014)

suggested that no single research method or theory can accurately offer a conclusion, but

this qualitative research study focused on the lived experiences of the participating

women and their careers. African American women have increased responsibilities and

workloads as compared to their European American counterparts, but the monetary

compensation or titles do not coincide with their pay (Collins, 2009). The

phenomenological design is a design and a philosophy that promotes understanding the

lived experience of individuals (Denzin, 2014). Twenty African American women shared

their lived experiences to contribute to an understanding of what strategies they implemented to ascend to a senior executive position. The goals of the research method and design section include the framework of the study.

Method

The method selected to conduct this study was qualitative research. Although qualitative and quantitative research methods are both scholarly inquiries, qualitative procedures offer a different approach (Denzin, 2014). Qualitative procedures were more conducive because African American women shared their lived experiences. Although the processes are similar, qualitative procedures rely on text and image data and have unique steps in data analysis and interpretation (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). A qualitative research procedure gives researchers the option to conduct interviews, observe participants, and to research documents (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Researchers use the qualitative research design to evaluate human behavior and habits (Marshall & Rossman, 2011).

Qualitative research is a field of inquiry in a complex and interconnected family of concepts, terms, and subject matter (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Qualitative research involves collecting data using a variety of materials such as personal experiences, life stories, case studies, and observations (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). This doctoral research involved exploring the minimal number of African American women in senior executive positions and their personal stories of the shaping of their careers. The 20 African American women offered information regarding how their careers advanced and the strategies implemented.

Research Design

A phenomenological research design was appropriate for this qualitative research study. Moustakas (1994) referred to this design as an essence description that analyzes statements, measures data in units, and evaluates lived experiences. The phenomenological design was appropriate for this study because this design highlighted African American women securing a senior executive position. Seidman (2013) noted that qualitative research evaluates the data in its entirety. During the interviews with the 20 African American women, the participants answered questions in reference to challenges faced and strategies used to gain a senior executive position. The design allowed observations of documents that compared compensation differences between African American women and their counterparts. I strived to discover why, even with equal opportunity laws in the United States, African American women face barriers as their careers ascend to senior leadership positions. African American women face barriers based on their race, gender, and economic class, and the focus of this doctoral research study was to provide the opportunity to learn about any direct barriers (Byrd & Stanley, 2009).

Population and Sampling

A snowball sample of 20 African American women in senior executive positions in the Southeastern region of the United States from various industries participated in this qualitative research study. Snowball sampling uses different methods to find hard to reach participants to participant in interviews (Denzin, 2014). Based on the underrepresentation of African American women in senior executive positions, a limited

number of African American women exist in these positions throughout the United States of America. For snowball sampling, the interviewee leads the interviewer to another participant for the study (Denzin, 2014). Because the saturation of the data collected, the sample size included 20 participants. The method of snowball sampling added relevance to this study because African American women referred me to other African American woman with similar backgrounds within their social networks.

I allocated two months to conduct the interviews with the participants. The participants were African American women who reached executive leadership positions in their careers and shared their lived experiences of their ascension and overcoming barriers to excel. Sampling is a method of testing a certain number of individuals of a population because not all individuals of the population are able to be tested (Castillo, 2009). Twenty African American women participated in interviews at their place of employment or via the telephone based on the participant's availability and schedule. The participants ranged from the age of 25 to 55 years old. The 20 African American women resided in the Southeastern Region of the United States. Participants, who were outside the state of Georgia, necessitated a telephone interview.

Ethical Research

To ensure the protection of participants' rights and confidentiality, data obtained during the interviews are in a locked safe and will be destroyed in 5 years. Participants could have withdrawn from the study at any time, and there were no obligation to participate in the research. I explained to the participants the interview process, and

expressed appreciation for sharing their experiences. Each participant received a Visa gift card of 20 dollars as a token of appreciation at the time of the interview.

Any information the participant provided is confidential. I will not use the participants' personal information for any purposes outside of this research project or include participants' names or anything that could identify the participants in the study reports. There was a signed confidentiality agreement (Appendix D) by anyone viewing the data, such as the transcribers. Once the study was completed, a one-page summary reflected the findings of the study for the participants and the community. This one-page was to inform the participants and the community of the lived experiences of African American women in senior executive positions. The objective to the community was to highlight the minimal number of African American women in senior level positions and how mentorship might enhance promotions.

Data Collection

Instruments

The interviews included 20 semistructured questions that were audio tape-recorded and transcribed (Denzin, 2014). Bernard (2013) suggested that semistructured interviews are conducive when one has one opportunity to interview participants. The pre-established questions had guidelines that enhanced the communication during the interview. The answers to questions were the opinions of the participants based on their lived experiences. To analyze the data, I used NVivo 10 software, produced by QSR International. This software application assisted in analyzing the data collected from face-

to-face or telephone interviews with 20 African American women in senior executive positions in the Southeastern region of the United States.

Data Collection Technique

Twenty African American women participated in face-to-face or telephone interviews based on convenience and availability. The interviews were audio tape-recorded and transcribed. Semistructured interviews followed a script, but remained open-ended for the participants to answer the questions freely (Bernard, 2013). During the interview, I used a device called an Echo Smart Pen, and the use of an Olympus Digital Voice Recorder ensured the transcription was accurate.

This doctoral research study included a pretest to add validity and reliability (Bernard, 2013). The research pretest included three African American women in management level positions that were not participants in the primary doctoral research study. The three African American women derived from my network of professional women. After the interviews were completed, the data were analyzed to ensure that the interview process was valid to move forward (see Appendix B).

Data Organization Techniques

To track data from interviews with 20 African American women, the data cataloged. Coding involved organizing data into chunks (Rossman & Rallis, 1998). The systematic process of analyzing textual data allowed me the ability to keep track of the data prior to data analysis. A code is a word or short phrase that captures the essence of the data received during the interview process (Saldana, 2012). Coding has two phases, the first phase is short and precise, in which the second phase more detailed and elaborate

(Green & Ledgard, 2011). Coding is a system of making data clear and concise in vertical alignment (Green & Ledgard, 2011). Once data was processed and analyzed, themes were created based on the outcome of the coding process. I used both phases in the coding process to create themes based on the data.

Data Analysis Technique

NVivo 10 included the concept of mapping and analyzing data (QSR International, 2012). During the coding process in creating categories, I created themes based on the data obtained during the interviews with 20 African American women. Evaluating the findings of this doctoral research study on African American women in senior executive positions, the results provided insight into how African American women relate to business, and how this study may help them to reach a senior executive level position. The presentation of the findings reflected back to the research question, and the conclusion of the data retrieved from the participants. The interview questions were:

1. What is the title of your current senior executive position?

2. How long did it take to reach a senior level position?

3. What specific personal characteristics would you say contributed most to your career development?

4. How did you prepare yourself for a senior level position?

5. How did developing a relationship with a Mentor influence your ascension to a senior executive position?

6. What obstacles have you overcome that has caused you the most hesitation in excelling to the next level in your career?

7. How did your educational and training background contribute to the accent to your senior level position?

8. Why do you think the percentage of African American women in senior level positions is less than 1%?

9. What advice would you give one aspiring to a senior executive position?

10. Identify three factors in leadership that African American women can use to assist her in ascending to the next level of her career.

11. How did the lack of successful African American women effect the advancement of your career?

The central research question was as follows: What strategies enhance the senior executive level career opportunities for African American women in the workplace?

The raw data produced in this doctoral research study correlated to the systems theory because African American women who seek to excel in their careers strive to enhance their careers, and the organizations in which they work. When barriers are present, the barriers may prevent African American women from excelling in their careers. This disparity could prohibit businesses to grow because of the lack of diversity in the workplace.

Reliability and Validity

Reliability

Ensuring reliability and validity included the implementation of several strategies. Pre-testing allowed the opportunity to make any corrections to the interview questions prior to the interview (Denzin, 2014). The participants who completed the pretest received an email with the interview questions, along with a questionnaire to complete regarding any issues that occurred during the interview process. The pretest participants came from a network of upper managers from the National Black MBA Associations (NBMBAA) and were not a part of the primary study. The participants in the pretest study did not find any issues with the interview questions, adding reliability to this research study. The pretest study interview questions and results for the pretest participants were:

Pretest Study Interview Questionnaire

1. The time required to complete the interview questions was:

___Less than 10 minutes ___10 to 20 minutes ___ 21-30 minutes ___More than 30 minutes

2. The interview questions were:

____Clear and easy to understand ___Somewhat easy to understand ___Confusing or difficult to understand

3. Were any words unfamiliar or confusing?

4. List the interview questions that you think were unclear or ambiguous. What changes are necessary to correct or improve these questions?

5. List any items you think were irrelevant.

6. List any items you think can add to the interview questions to produce additional strength to the study.

7. Please make any further comments or suggestions.

Validity

Validity is the stronger attribute of a qualitative research study because validity is the viewpoint of everyone including the participant, researcher, and the readers (Pickard, 2013). Qualitative research methods, as opposed to quantitative research methods, investigates the why and how of behavior, not just what, where, when. Qualitative research approaches reflect a more phenomenological approach to research, in which the thoughts of the participants about their own behavior are an integral part of interpreting the results. In addition, less of an emphasis is on transferability of findings to human beings, and more of a focus regarding how the group may use the findings studied.

Qualitative researchers may use different approaches in collecting data, such as interviews, observations, content analysis, and case studies. The ways of participating and observing can vary widely from setting to setting. In participant observation, researchers typically become members of a culture, group, or setting, and adopt roles to conform to that setting. In doing so, the aim is for a researcher to gain a closer insight into the culture's practices, motivations, and emotions. Validity, or trustworthiness, is the qualitative equivalent of validation approaches in quantitative research (Diether, 2012). Threats to internal validity in quantitative (experimental research) include, but are not limited, to: (a) history, (b) maturation, (c) selection, and (d) regression. Quantitative

proponents contend that qualitative research has garnered much criticism for failure to address validation issues.

Diether (2012) suggested internal validity confirms the accuracy of the research study design. To add validity to this research study, validity strategies clarifying researcher bias and using peer checking. Hansen, Draborg, and Kristensen (2011) explained that a researcher has the responsibility to ensure the accuracy of the findings. Denzin (2014) stated that a valid research study includes gathered, accurate, and interpreted data, reflecting the real world. To clarify the bias, I excluded self-reflection on the study based on my background, gender, and race. Peer checking involved another individual inquiring about the study and asking questions to validate that the study resonated with other readers (Azham & Hamidah, 2011). An external auditor reviewed the study in its entirety to add to the validity of the research. The auditor was not familiar with the study and provided an assessment of the study from an external viewpoint. These strategies added internal and external validity to the research study (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). The external auditor added an assessment of the entire dissertation from beginning to conclusion of the research study.

Transition and Summary

The purpose of Section 2 was to restate the purpose statement, review researcher's role in the data collection process, introduce the participants through the population, sample size, and sampling methods, and discuss the research method, design, data analysis, reliability, and validity. The intent of Section 3 was to introduce the findings of the study, the need for social change based on the findings of this study, and

recommendations for further research on the topic. Twenty African American women

interviewed and offered their lived experiences.

Section 3: Application to Professional Practice and Implications for Change

The purpose of this research study was to explore the experiences of African American women, equal opportunities, and mentorship in the workplace. The lack of opportunities and mentorship for African American women to transition into senior executive positions creates various barriers and prohibits their talents, skills, and leadership abilities from receiving recognition (Byrd, 2009). Mentorship contributes significantly to African American women seeking to be successful and relevant in their careers (Byrd, 2009). Twenty interviews with African American women in the southeastern region of the United States who held a senior executive position may add information to this phenomenon and provide insight on how African American women can prepare for obtaining a senior executive level position.

The professional business practice that is apparent in organizations is the lack of mentors and diversity in the workplace (Bell, Marquardt, & Berry, 2014). Based on the findings of this study, the participants found the ability to excel in their careers difficult because of their race and gender. Mentoring and diversity programs in organizations ensure that the organization is diverse at all levels of the business. Warner (2014) stated that African American women hold only 5.3% of senior executive positions. According to Warner, this disparity will not level out until 2085.

Overview of Study

The objective of this study was to explore the lived experiences of African American women in senior executive positions, equal opportunities, and mentoring in the work environment. I highlighted the obstacles that 20 African American women faced to

advance to a senior executive position and the path traveled to reach their senior executive level position. Data were collected through face-to-face or phone interviews. The central question for this research study was:

What strategies enhance the senior executive level career opportunities for African American women in the workplace?

Presentation of the Findings

Twenty African American women in senior executive level positions participated in an 11-question interview to explore the central question of this research study. The themes were formulated by analyzing data after the coding and cataloging process was completed. For anonymity, participants were coded as P1 through P20.

Theme 1: The Influence of a Mentor

Participants thought that a mentor added to their accession to a leadership position. Only 15 out of 20 had a mentor; however, those who did not have a mentor indicated they thought it would have been helpful to have someone coach them while advancing in their career. The participants who did have a mentor, whether at the beginning of their careers or currently, thought their mentors gave them insight into a number of situations and issues they would have otherwise not known. Well-established mentors offered advice based on their personal experiences. Participant experiences were as follows:

> I love having mentors. I have had three different mentors. Two women and one
>
> man. I learned when I was probably in my early 20s the benefits of having a
>
> mentor. I worked in the business banking area for now Bank of America. One

day, a lady who was my direct supervisor came to me and said, "Hey, we're

starting a program. It's kind of a mentor-ship for mid-level employees to get them

educated and build and develop their skills. I wasn't really sure that banking was

something that I wanted to do. I was thinking, I don't want to be mentored in the

area of banking. I don't know what I want to do with my life. It ended up being

that I was paired with, at the time, a senior level white male. He was probably mid

to late 50's, me being early 20's, working in a mostly Caucasian environment with

a lot of older women actually ended up being the best thing that could have ever

happened to me. He wasn't necessarily trying to groom me for banking industry.

He taught me how to understand what my passions were in the world of career.

How to leverage myself to be a better employee, a better leader, and work myself

to becoming who I ultimately wanted to be. So here today some 20 odd years

later, I still benefit from having mentors. Three mentors, as I mentioned before.

Two women and one man. The two women are both... one is a retired educator

who has traveled and lived all over the world. She kind of helped me through the

different aspects of in the whole world-life balance with being a single mom with

two kids and trying to climb that ladder of success. The other young lady is a

senior level executive for a corporation within the world of the media industry. At

that time, and I still am, heavily with the world of journalism. Help me to

understand and maneuver through the networking aspect of truly being able to get

what you want, and ask for it. The male, because I could always start off with the

male cause I felt like I needed a man in my life. He is just that - the man in my

life. I tell him that all the time. You realize you've been the one consistent man in my life for 15 years. He's like, "I don't know if I should take that as a good thing or not." He is 60. He's the president of a national nonprofit. I talk to him, sometimes, every day depending on the week. But he helps ground me, from a woman's perspective of trying to maintain . . . sometimes the good old boy network or sometimes all male dominated network. Climbing that ladder.

Also being able to be comfortable in the skin I'm in. Another thing that you face being a senior executive female African American woman, when you're young, people don't take you seriously. Or if you're in an environment where there are a bunch of men, they try to hit on you, or they try to see how far they can push you or how far they'll take it, or where your level of professionalism begins so that they can take advantage of you. He has helped me to recognize those signs for myself. There was a downfall to that. Some days, I feel like I'm so paranoid that I have to take a step back to really assess the environment. It's really difficult some days. (P1)

The mentors I've had, have pretty much kept it real--have basically given me the tools that I needed to move forward, so making the right decisions about taking positions because they actually told me, "Don't take certain positions" because it could have led me out of a job if I took certain positions because they knew the business and saw certain cuts that were going to happen in advance. However, most of my mentors have been male, which were white males. (P3)

One white male and I've had two female mentors, one white one and one black, that gave me feedback. In my career within the company of men, so it's more data controls, things to think about. When you look at a position, where it's going to be five years, not just the current situation, but really understanding where it's going to be in five years and beyond. My mentors helped me to have insight to those type of things within my organization. (P4)

Oh, 100%, 100%. We had a senior black female at first she was a manager, then she became a director, then she pretty much became a GM, and I could see how hard she worked and her dedication to the job, but really, her whole goal was to succeed and be successful. She became my mentor because I felt like she would be able to really talk honestly to me about building my career. She understood my plight, and so she and I would meet probably every week or at least every two weeks when I could get in on her schedule. Even if it was just for 15 minutes, she was would always give me feedback on the job. She would always tell me things that I could do better. There were some very difficult conversations to have with her, but I would honestly say she really prepared me mentally for what was to come in my career, and, oh, 100% I would say. I mean, I think that I worked very hard. I won't say 100% because a lot of it was you having that drive to just want to be successful, but once you have that drive, having someone who's already been there and done that, and share their knowledge with you. It just makes your walk a little easier, and you at least feel like you're not alone, which was big for me. I felt like I was not alone. Even to this day, I still go to her. I will talk to her

about things that I'm going through at work and she just really gives some

positive advice for me personally, as a woman, and as a business partner. She

gives me really great advice.

She was a single mom, too, so her whole walk and how she climbed to success

was amazing to me. The advice that she gave me helped me, wow, as a mom, I'm

at home, and having that balance between work and home. She really understood

that. I tell people all the time, she was very instrumental in my success, because

nobody would have told me some of the things that she has told me. I love that

lady. I love her.

I would never have known because she was hard on me but I just thought, well

she is evil, but I don't think that was her . . . it wasn't her intention to be evil. She

just had to be very hard and structured and disciplined at work because the same

rules, they just don't apply to you. They just don't apply to you as a woman, and

especially an African-American woman. They don't apply to you. (P6)

It definitely helped. I think that it definitely helped. A mentor would be beneficial.

I had a few but with one in particular department at a law firm and so being able

to watch her grow, being able to watch her interaction with the clients and her

interaction with other attorneys, associates or the staff kind of helped me to see

how things were done and what I want to do, what I don't want to do. I think it's

good when you can just go to someone and have them give me examples and so

what another person can give me with something to look at that they've already

done or they've been through it, it definitely contributed. (P7)

Like I said before, when I was a teacher and the principal, who was very, very young, I think she was either 26 or 27 and the assistant principal, she was an African-American woman, and I was not much older than she was. She may have been in her 30s or something and once I started teaching and got into the position, I realized initially I thought, "Oh, God. I never want to be a principal."

Of course, that was fear and doubt but then immediately I just saw a leadership role that I had and they put me in those leadership roles pretty early. Like I said, I was hired to be in one position within the first eight months. I was in the first semester and served as the intern and then within a month I was in Vice President of Academic Chair's position.

I had mentors at both levels that had been there, they would tell me, "This is this, this is this and this. You don't need to do that." Just currently on the phone, someone I could call and say, "Let me share this idea with you. What do you think about it?" I think the role as far as the mentor being involved was significant for me. (P8)

I think it did. I think along the way I've had people who have been, I wouldn't say the official mentor but we didn't necessarily come together and say officially, "I want you to be my mentor." Really just kind of took me under their wings and help me and showed me things and it helped point out things about with me some areas where there were an opportunity for improvement and that was always appreciated because sometimes people won't say that.

They won't give you that feedback that's going to help you and be successful and I had people that just really sowed into my life and to my career and helped me along the way. I think that everyone needs a mentor if you really want to make it in a corporate environment or a business; I just think you have to have someone there who could guide you. (P11)

I think mentoring is key because they allow you to see things and approach different circumstances and situations typically based on their experiences. They actually keep you in touch with other senior level counterpart who may not even work in your industry but address different situations differently and it kind of helps to accelerate you as a professional of where you want to go with your specific career. (P13)

Yes, I've had mentors in the past. I actually have a mentor now and I think that having a mentor is very valuable. I think that mentor can give you guidance into situations that can help you move to the next level within your career. I think that having a mentor gives you someone that you can go to and get constructive criticisms and someone who can give you the ins and outs of the level you are trying to reach. (P14)

Having a mentor was probably the most beneficial part to excelling because they were the ones to give me the necessary training and real life experiences to help me with my day-to-day operations. (P15)

I had mentors and didn't even realize I had mentors. You'd be surprised what you can learn from them. I was fortunate enough to have people who saw the will-

power in me and wanted to help me excel. They saw me working and striving

hard and just always offered a better way of doing things. If someone is offering

you a hand, you should take it. Say thank you and show appreciation. (P16)

I have had many people who have helped me along the way however, I have had

two main mentors since I first started out of college that have really groomed me

to this point in my career. One in particular, she is a well-known business woman

in Atlanta and she open me to her network and she really took me under her wings

and really groomed me to be able to conduct myself in business setting with

individuals on all levels. I think mentors are so important for those intangible

assets. (P17)

Theme 2: Work Ethic and Determination

Participants agreed that to be successful takes hard work and determination. The

majority concurred that as an African American woman, they were required to work

twice as hard as colleagues to be taken seriously did. Once African American women

reached certain levels in their careers, they worked very hard to maintain and plan for any

issues that might occur.

Going above and beyond, staying, and working long hours, 16-hour days. First

thing learned, just pretty much just learning the business. That was key really,

learning the business and improving myself. (P4)

I really had to learn our business, being that the whole scope of our business is

more than just my job. I also really had to just be a master at everything. In the

way, I had to just really just really focus on the way I handle myself. I work with

people. Honing all my leadership skills. Just really building trust with people and, in addition to that, you have to change your whole image. It really was a change of image. You have to almost set yourself apart in so many different ways in trying to climb the corporate ladder. The way you look, the way you dress, the way you talk, the people you communicate with, the things you will and will not do. You have this feeling that you just always have to always exceed the standard. There is a standard that is clearly defined, but for me, as an African-American woman, I always had to exceed the standard to even be really recognized, not just doing a good job. Doing a good job isn't good enough. It has to be an exceptional job. Yeah. Well, you definitely got to be a leader. You definitely got to be a leader. You definitely have to be a leader because you have to really get people to buy into you, and you have to really just be prepared to be different. You know? You really do. Situational. You have to be able to adjust to different situations. I would say adapting in different situations, because there's always going to be a different situation. You're always going to be presented with something different, something new, a new challenge, and you have to be able to adjust to that. You've got to be able to adapt to that, and your communication skills, honestly, is probably critical.

The way you talk, the way you communicate to people, the way you listen, the way you listen and then regurgitate back or turn what you've heard into some actions I would definitely say is probably the three most important things, for me. That's what I found. Those are probably the characteristics that have made the

biggest difference in my career. They're in all aspects of it. It never changes those three. There's always going to be a situation. You've always got to be the leader in the situation. You've always got to be the bigger person in the situation.

Then, you know, you've always got to communicate, and because there are so many different levels and different types of people that you'll be working with, your communication, you've got to be able to adjust that to really be able to talk to all different kinds of people and at any given time. (P6)

I think just to work really hard. Know yourself like you really have to know whatever your field is you really have to know it, read, go out, be a student of that field forever and really know what you do and do it really well and then just really work hard. I think women have to work extremely hard and so just work. You may have to put in 20 plus hour days and that's just what it is.

It will be tough. You have to think about it with having a family and your other commitments. I don't think there's any magic formula for getting to a successful place other than like planting those seeds and working hard, knowing what you know so that when that great opportunity comes, you have already laid that foundation. (P7)

Three factors in leadership, I think to be a leader, you must possess the ability to inspire your team to be great. I think you must exhibit a very strong work ethic and most importantly, always be confident in who you are. Don't sacrifice who you are and what you believe in. At the end of the day, you are your reputation. (P19)

It did but it really didn't. I would have loved to see more African American women in my organization doing what I do but it just didn't happen. So, I took it as ok, I'm the first one here of my gender and color to accomplish this at this organization so I can now bring someone who is just like me along with me. And I have reached back to bring someone along with me. It has to start somewhere so why not with me. Giving back is why I do it all anyway. (P20)

Theme 3: Career versus Family

Creating a successful career path takes much dedication, time, sacrifice, and determination. However, as discussed by the participants, to be successful in a career is a very difficult balancing act to maintain a healthy family environment with family.

There are several obstacles that I feel like we, personally, have to overcome. Again, that whole work-life balance. Even though I'm not married, I do have two children. During my entire escalation process, my children were younger. There were times where I had to sacrifice, choice about to work as late as everybody else. Do I miss some recital or something like that or football games that my boys were doing or to get this report done prior to leaving work. If this is something that they're going to be looking at to see if they want to consider me for a promotion or be a part of management. Women already don't make the same amount of money that men make. Even when you get to the senior level we're still about 15% less than what they are, and we're doing the same amount of work, and in many instances, more. There's no disrespect to the men that are out there. Most of them are definitely earning their way, but a lot of them aren't doing what we're

doing. We're moms, we're wives, we're sisters, we're aunts, and we're daughters. Many of us are taking care of extended family members. We're maintaining households on our own. Not to mention if you are a senior level executive female who is running a department of five or more, you're babysitting. Unfortunately you are. You're dealing with everybody's personalities. Who comes to work and she's mad with her husband, or Joe's got issues with his kids. You take on everybody else's family.

To be in this level of existence, there's a whole lot of sacrifice that goes along with it so you have to be ready, willing and able to give more of yourself than what you realize. I think young people are often times, they don't realize the sacrifices they are going to have to make. They think, oh I can go work at this company and I can make $80,000.00 a year. Well, what that $80,000.00 going to come with. Yes, $80,000.00 is great. It's a great salary to live off of. Definitely can maintain your household and take care of your family. But what are the sacrifices that you're going to have to put in place as a result. Are you going to have to travel a great percentage of the time? Are you going to have to work 70-80 hours a week? That's real. That's just your work. That's not being momma, being daddy, being something else. There are a lot of different challenges that come along with that. (P2)

I loved the job, I loved working with the people but it got to a point where I had to determine what was more important for me because it was killing me that my son would say, "Mommy, you're never home or you come home so late or I hate your

job." They were really, really young and I was in those time demanding jobs that will require for me to work all day and night and then come home and then even work after I get home.

I think that could be a factor too if you're a mother and even those positions and sometimes you just decide that, "Okay. This is not for me. My family is more important." That's one thing and then for me too health wise. At one particular time, I never had time for my health and things like that and was just on the job. It was just crazy and it was just really stressful and I've just decided, "Okay. I have to leave." All this money, but I need to be here for my family. I need to be here for me and so I think that was at least just from personal experiences would probably contribute to that 1% of those women who just stay there and they work it out and they could be that they're single and they could do that or maybe there's an understanding and they just discuss it with their husband or significant other and they try to balance it but it's a different task. I think that's one of the reasons why.

I was always very clear and just saying, "I'm a mother first and when I'm here with you, I will give you 100% of me," but they'll understand that I'm a mother first. I would do your research and just determine, speak to your significant others if you have one and determine if this is something that you think you can really do and balance and as far as having a family and being a mom and also being the CEO in the company or whatever, I say go for it and do it because you don't want

to ever reflect back and say I never did go for it when I think I should have. That would be the advice that I would give. (P8)

The biggest obstacle has been maintaining a family as well as trying to excel in a profession. It very difficult trying to be mommy and also be the leader of your organization/school. It's a tug a war. I think it's truly a balancing act with career and family and I also think because women have to work twice as hard; it's twice as hard. (P15)

Theme 4: Strategies to Success

The 20 participants shared one attribute: the desire to be successful and the tenacity to overcome obstacles to ensure they reached a certain level of success. Despite the barriers that exist, 'No' was not an option. If the answer was 'No,' then they were sure to go around that person or issue to create a positive answer.

Will power. Strong will power. Tolerance for the opposition. Opposition meaning gender - male dominated field. Those are the main strategies used to succeed in the workplace. (P1)

To be organized. To be a detail orientated person. To have a sense of business structure. A leader, to exemplify and display leadership qualities. To be able to manage multiple things at a time to multiple personalities. Nurturing in terms of whatever the work is that has to be done, in addition to being firm but fair. (P2)

I would have to say perseverance, tenacity, accountability, and being genuine. (P12)

I went back to school. I already had a Master's but I went back for a second

Master's in school leadership and then I also continued and obtained my Ph.D. in

Educational Leadership. (P15)

Theme 5: Overcoming the Barriers

Because it's not meant for black women to be there. I think it's because, as black

women, we're very nurturing. We're very nurturing, and being in business is hard,

whether you're owning your own business or whether you are working for

someone else, trying to be in a leadership position. I think we're very nurturing

people, so you have to really be in a different mindset about a lot of things when

you want to move forward, ahead, and advance your career.

Why are we not . . . I think it's not fair. I think there are so many things that are

not fair. I think you have to be prepared to deal with what's not fair in a very

diplomatic and tactical approach. There are so many times I've been in meetings

and I wanted to just go off, should I say, or say what's really on my mind, but you

have to count to 10, and you have to say, "Okay, I heard you" and you have to sit

back and, okay, how am I going to deal with this?

It just takes a lot mentally. It's almost like playing chess, every day, and it's

almost a game. You do see people setting you up, but you have to just say you

know, you have to decide what's more important to you, advancing my career or

letting people set you up to fail, because they will, and it's not fair. It's not equal,

it's not fair, and like I said earlier, you have to be twice as good at everything. It's

almost like going to work and being in a war every day. It's just like, you know,

you have people on your side, but they're only on your side as long as you are as good as the value that you're giving.

One step back or one fall back, it sets you back, whereas Ted or Steve could have several mishaps, several failures, and it's okay, but for some reason, as an African-American woman, they expect you to either be weak, they think you're going to get involved in a game that you can't play and you can't win, and so the moment you do have, you show weakness, they jump on it.

I think it's not meant for us to be there, but once you are there, you're accepted but you're only really accepted because you've done so fricking much to get there that they can't really overlook you anymore.

They have to pay you attention. You don't give them a choice. Then they really do feel like they need you. I need you to be here for as long as I need you for this, and it's almost like you have to keep reinventing your wheel to stay there. Even once you make it, it's not okay that you've made it and you're there, you've got to just keep it going all the time. When I say keep it going, that level of performance, it has to stay there.

Yeah, and I just think there's just so much that goes on, and I think a lot has to do with the conversation. Do they really want to pay you that? Do they really look at you as a person and say that you have really . . . you're deserving of what you earned? I think that's a hard thing for them to say, well, for example, "I'm going to pay you $150,000 this year, and Steve makes 90." You know? It's like, I don't know if I really should be paying you this much.

It's almost like they have a hard time even conversing with you, dealing with you, and then you start to get to that, well, you know, it's okay for Steve to say this, but it's not okay for Angela to say this. It's not meant for African-American women today. I think we've come a very long way, but it's still the glass ceiling. It's still there.

Another thing, I just don't know if it's for everybody to want to work that hard all the time, because you know it's not fair, and the higher you go, the more you see it. The clearer it becomes. I don't think it's for everybody. It's so hard. It's so hard. It's so hard.

I have had the pleasure of having some other of my managers or my peers tell me, "Wow, you really, you did an amazing job" and "You worked really hard" but I don't think that they understand that it's because I have to. Or maybe they think know I have to, but they can't believe I did it.

They're surprised that I actually did it. To me, seeing that, I mean, I think today I get the most reward out of that, knowing that I've done something that you didn't expect me to do. That's my biggest reward today. My compensation is good, but it does become a really good feeling to know you've accomplished something, or you've beat them at their own game or you've gone a place they didn't expect you to go or you delivered on a level that they didn't expect you to deliver on. You don't even have to really try anymore. It's inbreeded in you and it becomes very natural for you to perform. (P6)

I think it's interesting and the fact that the stereotype as relates to men and women and they're talking about pay and quality and things like that. I believe that in a form factor where we've always believed in ways of just showing that women are never paid the same. I think that is one factor.

Two, personally for me, as a mother first, there have been times where I've had to resign and this factor and all of the additional pressures being a mom, being an executive leader in this position, those types of jobs and roles are kind of demanding. You were able to go into a situation where you have that power and you have someone who understands that and they always work with you in regards to that.

In my experience, that is so much to take. They gave demands, crazy hours and they want you to be there and what they don't really understand is you have children and you have to leave or you may have things like that. I know as a mother for me, I've had to walk away from two jobs. (P8)

I just feel like we're not given a fair chance. We're stereotyped and we're judged automatically because there aren't . . . everybody's not ambitious and there are a lot of African-American women that are not striving to do better. The few of us that are were automatically stereotyped and that's unfortunate, very unfortunate. (P9)

I would say the number one obstacle is and I'm trying to think of the best way to put it. For me personally has been, in some cases depending on who your work for and the company that you're with, it's not getting the recognition for the

things that you do and that is an obstacle for me because when you are in . . .

when there's a management role or a senior executive role you're putting a lot of

time, a lot of work, a lot of brain power in just doing what you do. There are some

corporations that they just don't give you the recognition that you should get.

I understand that when you work for a company or whatever you produce for

them to become a very intellectual property, but I also believe that you still give

that person that recognition and because that makes the person continue to

produce for you. As opposed to just saying, "Okay. Thank you." I think that

happened a couple of times where I've done some things that really took their

company to the next level even to the point of helping them make millions of

dollars and once it was produced, I was taken aback little bit. My name was never

mentioned. I was never given the recognition for what I did, the work that I did. I

think that's kind of a hesitation to some point where you could say to yourself,

"Well, you know what, why even try? Why even put forward to this effort?"

I had to overcome that and just figure out a way to make that known in the

beginning when I start working with someone that, "Yes. I'll definitely take one

for the team and give the team credit," but I also want to just have that

acknowledgement. (P11)

There are probably multiple reasons for that. I know there's definitely the skill

and the desires there but I think maybe this political environment or the corporate

environment there are still lots of boundaries and challenges instilling that

African-American women see, the minority in general to reach those top and fill

out the management but I think that multiple facets in there, I don't think that the skill set is not there. It's just a part of the politics. (P12)

Within a corporate position I think there's a lot of backstabbing, a tremendous amount of politics. I hate to say there's a very soft level and sometimes there's a grand level of discrimination although it can't be proved, you know that it's there. That's an obstacle. Recently with my prior position with my previous employer, I basically was being penalized for being very successful and that was one of the reasons that kind of pushed me to start looking and thinking about the career opportunities out there because I had worked an enormous amount of years doing and growing my business because it was my business.

My job was to manage it and to grow it while I grew it beyond where it was supposed to grow and it exceeded but I was outperforming my peers so significantly in making so much money than them but my manager said, "Oh, time out. You're making too much money." It was hilarious and I was thinking something like I'm not there burning the street for you to see that. This was not just lying in my lap. It just does not lay in your lap. That was over a period of time where you build these relationships and brokers and clients trust you where they want to do additional business with you and that's how you grow your business what I would think kind of loss to them.

Well, what they did was, I thought they were just tripping. They took my block of business, my most high premium cases that basically produced the most amount of money and disperse those clients among my team.

I think because it's dominated still by men and I think Caucasian men in general. I think that we're starting to see growth with women in leadership positions depending on the industry. I think diversity has a lot to do with it and what type of diversity program certain companies have. I definitely think it's all a ride. It's probably a very slow ride but we are getting there.

I was reading a book by a female who I think she's the CEO of Facebook now, but it's a really, really good book and it talks about just some of the struggles. We had learned how to climb up the corporate ladder and we are our worst enemy. I'm going to be honest with you. I think we kind of hold ourselves back when it comes to moving up the ladder in leadership.

There's still intimidation or just that psychological thought processes that's not . . . you're kind of bluffing your blessing. I think that has a lot to do with it. Getting out of your own way, I had that problem. I had to struggle then I got out of my own way but it's all about kind of just pushing forward. The name of the book is called *Lean In*. (P13)

Applications to Professional Practice

Business leaders can apply the information learned from this study by ensuring that the practices of diversity and equal opportunities are implemented properly in the workplace. Business leaders have the authority to create the atmosphere and create a more productive workflow among all workers. Results from this research study indicated that African American women could operate successfully at a senior executive level position by implementing perseverance, a strong work ethic, pure determination, and the

guidance from a mentorship. The 5.3% of African American women who hold senior executive level positions should be a higher amount (Warner, 2014). African American women have the desire to fulfill positions such as senior executive level positions but lack the opportunities to excel in the workplace because of the lack of diversity and equal opportunities.

Diversity in the workplace is important to an organization. Business leaders should have diversity programs in position in their organizations to ensure equality, fairness, and opportunities for all races and gender. More so, business leaders could properly enforce the diversity initiatives to ensure that there is equality among all employees. Von Bertalanffy noted that everything in the environment interacts so that systems and people align together to create a positive working environment. African American women seek the opportunities to contribute their skills and expertise to corporations but business leaders have the authority, and should, offer these opportunities to African American women.

<div align="center">**Implications for Social Change**</div>

The implications for positive social change include the potential to improve the society, culture, organizations and how African American women are viewed in their careers. African American women could add a positive prospective for aspiring African American women seeking to transition into leadership positions. Based on this research study, African American women might make business leaders more aware of the disparity of inequalities in the workplace and make the issues more visible to society and culture. By making the issues of inequalities for African American women to excel in

their careers more visible, this opens the opportunity to discuss the topic and seek resolutions across all cultures, organizations, and communities. African American women desire to improve their companies, their families, their cultures, and their communities, but they simply needed an opportunity to excel in their careers.

Recommendations for Action

I recommend that business leaders take action and make it a priority to ensure that all employees receive fair and equal opportunities to excel in their careers. African American women might contribute different aspects of business growth potential based on their background, skillsets, and experiences. I recommend that business leaders enhance their diversity and mentoring programs to ensure that all employees that seek to be promoted to the next level of their careers has an equal opportunity to do so. Business leaders need to allow opportunities for African American women to fulfill senior executive positions.

Recommendations for Further Study

I recommend further research about ethical issues in organizations such as conducting business with high integrity, addressing diversity issues within the workplace and compliance and governance issues. By highlighting these areas in corporations ensures that businesses continue to work towards operating at the highest level of integrity to ensure everyone receives equal opportunities to excel. Further research might give business leaders insight into why their organization are failing or how it might operate on a more productive and proficient level to succeed.

Further research about mentoring programs in organizations would be valuable as well, and how these programs relate to African American women and their career paths. The mentoring programs could give African American women more access to senior executive level management positions. The importance of examining the problem exists as well as future action to change this phenomenon. The contributing factors might be the lack of opportunities, the lack of skillset or inability to balance work and family life. Equal opportunity is an issue that remains as of 2014, despite the EEOC and diversity programs in organizations. Additional research regarding the determination of pay scales may add relevant explanation to why pay is not equal for everyone, regardless of race or gender. I recommend further research about the disparity of African American women in senior executive level management positions and continued research to explore why the percentage is so low as compared to their European American counterparts.

Reflections

As I reflect on my research experience, the process was insightful and informative. I remained neutral throughout the entire process and did not want to bias the data. As an African American woman interviewing other African American women, I identified with their struggles and the obstacles that the women faced or were facing at the time of the interview. A senior executive level position takes hard work to reach, and although the accession in their careers may not have always been fair along the journey; once these women reached a certain point in their careers, the women refused to be ignored. The women inspired me to continue to accomplish my goals and to strive for more, regardless of the obstacles that may lie ahead.

Summary and Study Conclusions

The percentages of African American women in business who hold senior executive level positions are low. African American women who are educated, experienced, and diligent workers have the skills and knowledge to thrive in corporations as senior executives but need the opportunities and mentorship to do so. The participants shared their lived experiences and strategies on how to reach those particular types of positions. There were barriers that existed that prohibited the 20 African American women from excelling in their careers. Despite these barriers, the 20 African American women created strategies to reach their senior executive level positions. The phenomenon of only 5.3% of African American women that hold senior executive positions (Warner, 2014) remains an issue that needs attention.

This doctoral research study included strategies shared by the participants and may assist African American women who seek a senior executive position. The participants shared that communicating with a mentor was a significant role to support them through the progression of their careers. Although having a mentor was valuable, businesses must still embrace change and ensure that diversity and higher level career opportunities are available regardless of race, gender, or culture (Byrd, 2014).

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Appendix A: Interview Questions

1. What is the title of your current senior executive position?

2. How long did it take to reach a senior level position?

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

4. How did you prepare yourself for a senior level position?

5. How did a relationship with a Mentor influence your ascension to a senior executive position?

6. What obstacles have you overcome that has caused you the most hesitation in excelling to the next level in your career?

7. How did your educational and training background contribute to the accent to your senior level position?

8. Why do you think the percentage of African American women in senior level positions is less than 1%?

9. What advice would you give one aspiring to a senior executive position?

10. Identify three factors in leadership that African American women can use to assist her in ascending to the next level of her career.

11. How did the lack of successful African American women effect the advancement of your career?

Appendix B: Pretest Study Interview Questionnaire

1. The time required to complete the interview questions was:

___Less than 10 minutes ___10 to 20 minutes ___21-30 minutes ___More than

30 minutes

2. The interview questions were:

___Clear and easy to understand ___Somewhat easy to understand

___Confusing or difficult to understand

3. Were any words unfamiliar or confusing?

4. List the interview questions that you think were unclear or ambiguous. What

changes could be made to correct or improve these questions?

5. List any items you think were irrelevant.

6. List any items you think should be added to the interview questions.

7. Please make any further comments or suggestions.

Thanks for your participation.

Appendix C: Consent Form

CONSENT FORM

You are invited to take part in a research study of African American women in senior leadership positions and share the strategies you used to overcome various barriers to reach your level of success. The researcher is inviting African American women from various industries who are in senior leadership positions to be in the study. This form is part of a process called "informed consent" to allow you to understand this study before deciding whether to take part.

This study is being conducted by a researcher named Latasha Cain, who is a doctoral student at Walden University.

Background Information:

The purpose of this study is to explore the barriers that African American women might face in transitioning into senior leadership positions and the strategies used to overcome those barriers.

Procedures:

If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to:

- Conduct a 11 question, audio recorded interview that will take approximately 30-45 minutes
- Share information on your lived experiences as a senior leader in your industry
- Be as open and honest as possible

Here are some sample questions:

- What is the title of your current leadership position?
- How long did it take to reach a senior level position?
- What specific personal characteristics would you say contributed

most to your career development? List them in order of
importance.

Voluntary Nature of the Study:

This study is voluntary. Everyone will respect your decision of whether or not you choose to be in the study. No one will treat you differently if you decide not to be in the study. If you decide to join the study now, you can still change your mind later. You may stop at any time.

Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study:

Being in this study would not pose risk to your safety or wellbeing. The research study proposes to reduce the gap of how many African American women are in senior leadership positions and the number of women that are highly qualified and are waiting for the opportunity to be in a senior leadership position. By creating a more diverse organization, this may enhance the consumer's perspective on the company as a whole.

Payment:

For your participation in this study, you will be given a $10 Visa gift card in appreciation of your time and valued information that you will share to provide a level of understanding of the obstacles African American women face every day to excel in her career.

Privacy:

Any information you provide will be kept confidential. The researcher will not use your personal information for any purposes outside of this research project. Also, the researcher will not include your name or anything else that could identify you in the study reports. Data will be kept secure by locked file compartment. Data will be kept for a period of at least 5 years as required by the university.

Contacts and Questions:

You may ask any questions you have now. Or if you have questions later, you may contact the researcher via researcher's phone number or email: latashadcain@gmail.com. If you want to talk privately about your rights as a participant, you can call Dr. ████████████ Walden University's approval number for this study is 06-13-14-0232974 and it expires on June 13, 2014.

Statement of Consent:

I have read the above information, and I feel I understand the study well enough to make a decision about my involvement. By signing below, I understand that I am agreeing to the terms described above.

The researcher will give you a copy of this form to keep.

Statement of Consent:

I have read the above information, and I feel I understand the study well enough to make a decision about my involvement. By signing below, I understand that I am
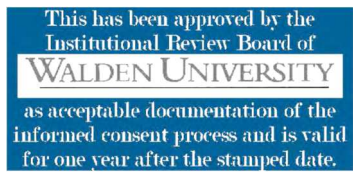
agreeing to the terms described above.

Printed Name of Participant

Date of consent

Participant's Signature

Researcher's Signature

This has been approved by the
Institutional Review Board of
WALDEN UNIVERSITY
as acceptable documentation of the
informed consent process and is valid
for one year after the stamped date.

Appendix D: Confidentiality Form

<u>CONFIDENTIALITY   AGREEMENT</u>

Name of Signer:

During the course of my activity in collecting data for this research: "Barriers Encountered by African American Women Executives", I will have access to information, which is confidential and should not be disclosed. I acknowledge that the information must remain confidential, and that improper disclosure of confidential information can be damaging to the participant.

By signing this Confidentiality Agreement I acknowledge and agree that:

1. I will not disclose or discuss any confidential information with others, including friends or family.

2. I will not in any way divulge, copy, release, sell, loan, alter or destroy any confidential information except as properly authorized.

3. I will not discuss confidential information where others can overhear the conversation. I understand that it is not acceptable to discuss confidential information even if the participant's name is not used.

4. I will not make any unauthorized transmissions, inquiries, modification or purging of confidential information.

5. I agree that my obligations under this agreement will continue after termination of the job that I will perform.

6. I understand that violation of this agreement will have legal implications.

7. I will only access or use systems or devices I'm officially authorized to access and I will not demonstrate the operation or function of systems or devices to unauthorized individuals.

Signing this document, I acknowledge that I have read the agreement and I agree to comply with all the terms and conditions stated above.

Signature: Date: