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Transcending Thresholds: A Phenomenological Study of How African American Women Working in the Federal Government Experience Professional Development

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Transcending Thresholds: A Phenomenological Study of How African American Women
Working in the Federal Government Experience Professional Development

by

Betsy A. Kelly Bell

A Dissertation Presented to the
Graduate School of Humanities and Social Sciences of Nova Southeastern University
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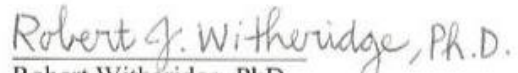
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This dissertation was submitted by Betsy A. Kelly Bell under the direction of the chair of the dissertation committee listed below. It was submitted to the Graduate School of Humanities and Social Sciences and approved in partial fulfillment for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Conflict Analysis and Resolution at Nova Southeastern University.

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Dedication

With glory, honor, and praise, I dedicate this work to my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, in whom I can do all things. I also dedicate this dissertation to my husband Eric, whose belief in me, love, and support brought me through—I love you sweetheart. This work is also dedicated to my children, JP, Niki, and Evan, and my grandchildren Aiden, Liam, and Kayleigh. Thank you so much for your love, patience, and sacrifice, as I labored on this project—and now you have your Mom and Mimi back! To my parents James and Patricia Pierce, I dedicate this dissertation, as you both have given and sacrificed so much for me, and have provided immeasurable support. I also dedicate this work to my surviving siblings, Esther, Ivan, Ronnette, Troy, and Shay, as well as their children; thank you for your love, encouragement, and support. This dissertation is also dedicated to the memory of my departed siblings, Tammy, Maurice, and Tony; you are always in my heart. Lastly, I dedicate this dissertation to two special middle school teachers who invested their time and effort in me, and not only believed in me, but helped me to believe in myself; thank you Mr. Jenkins and Mr. Connors—I am ever grateful.

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Thanks be to God, my source, my strength, and my all and all.

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I must also thank my 'village' of family and friends who not only supported me, but also prayed for me. To my other parents, Roy and Joann Bell, thank you so much for your love, support and constant encouragement. Dr. Sonia Galloway and (soon to be Dr.) Brenda Williams, thank you for your love, encouragement, friendship, and support—we made it through! To Tijuana Hannibal, thank you for being my 'constant friend' and for your support and encouragement. Dr. David Miller, thank you for your scholarly advice and friendship. To my Pastors, Rodney and Val Frazier, thank you for pushing me toward that 'excellent spirit' and not the 'spirit of excellence'.

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List of Acronyms

CLF	Civilian labor force
CSRA	Civil Service Reform Act
EEOC	Equal Employment Opportunity Commission
FEORP	Federal Equal Opportunity Recruitment Program
FY	Fiscal year
GAO	General Accountability Office (United States)
GSR	General Schedule and Related (grade)
IRB	Institutional Review Board
OCT	Organizational culture theory
OPM	Office of Personnel Management (United States)

Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the professional development experiences of federally employed African American women and to discover whether and how they perceive race and gender as informing their professional development. The researcher used an existential phenomenological approach, guided by the following research questions: what are the professional development experiences of African American women working in the federal government?; what, if any, challenges to professional development have been experienced by this population, and what meaning do they find in those experiences?; and what are the perceptions of this population regarding how social-organizational constructs inform their professional development? The theories used in this study to illuminate the participants' experiences included feminism, critical race theory, black feminist thought, and organizational development theory. Through data analysis, the study results pointed to "transcending thresholds" as the essence of how the selected population experienced professional development, which was elucidated through seven (7) themes: 1) twice the fight, 2) contending with challenges and barriers, 3) understanding self and self-efficacy, 4) professional development investors, 5) impact of education, 6) motivational factors and influences, and 7) collective responsibility. The results of this study provide organizational decision makers with a better understanding of this population's perspective, which will provide better opportunities to more effectively address and manage conflicts stemming from their underrepresentation in higher-level positions. This study also contributes to the understanding of workplace conflict experienced by this population, which may inform

policies developed by agencies that could help manage, reduce, or resolve those workplace conflicts.

Chapter 1: Introduction

"I am a Black Feminist. I mean I recognize that my power as well as my primary oppressions come as a result of my blackness as well as my womaness, and therefore my struggles on both of these fronts are inseparable." – Audre Lorde

The federal workforce has experienced significant change from the early 1980s to the present with the passage of the Civil Service Reform Act (CSRA) of 1978, which included a call for the establishment of a federal workforce that was reflective of the nation's population (Naff, 2001). The Act also established the Federal Equal Opportunity Recruitment Program (FEORP) yearly report, which was created to help address the inequities in the representation of women and minorities in the federal workforce (United States Office of Personnel Management [OPM], 2001). Since that time, the representation of women and minorities in the federal workforce continues to be higher than that of the civilian labor force (CLF) (U.S. OPM, 2012). However, women and minorities continue to be concentrated at lower levels, creating the need for further research not only on their overall representation, but also on their representation in the higher level positions.

Based on the mandate of the CSRA, the OPM provides an abundance of data and information in the form of the FEORP annual report on the representation of women and minorities in the federal workforce (U.S. OPM, 2001). The FEORP reports specifically provide data on the composition of the federal workforce broken down by race/ethnicity and gender. However, these data fail to address the status of employees whose identity crosses more than one of the federally identified social constructs. For instance, the FEORP report does not document the specific representation of African American women in the federal workforce. Additionally, other extant research also fails to examine

their status—as much of the research explores racism and sexism independently (Bell, 1990; Crenshaw, 1991; Davis, 2012).

As African American women continue in their careers in the federal workforce, they are challenged by questions of who they are professionally, how they advance, and how they become successful. They must constantly manage how their two merging social identities impact the way they navigate their organizational structures to develop professionally. Unfortunately, research on how African American women experience professional development in the federal government is extremely limited (Hunt, 2011). To fully capitalize on the talents of each employee, organizations must have an understanding of developmental needs of the various groups, as well as how they experience professional development.

This study focused on African American women as one of the groups who contend with the convergence of race and gender as they navigate organizational structures. It explored the lived experience of professional development of African American women and their perception of how the intersection of race and gender informs their professional development. Chapter one provides a general framework for the study, highlighting the importance of understanding the professional development experiences of African American women in the federal workforce. The framework consists of background information on the subject, an overview of the problem, the purpose of the study, research questions, a theoretical framework, definition of terms, assumptions, limitations and delimitations of the study, and a brief outline of what is covered in the following chapters of the dissertation.

Background of the Problem

Although the federal government has implemented various strategies designed to increase workplace diversity, and significant progress has been made towards addressing the underrepresentation of minorities, African American women continue to face various challenges as they seek opportunities and advancement in their careers. To fully address the challenges they face in their professional development, there must be an understanding from their perspective. This salient point is most succinctly captured in an excerpt from the 1992 United States General Accountability Office (GAO) report:

[C]hanges in the number of women, minorities, and older workers in the federal government are real and can be addressed through a variety of human resource policies and programs such as child care, flexible work schedules, diversity training, and reemployment incentives. Demographic differences within the federal workforce indicate that different policies and programs may be needed in different agencies and regions. In deciding which strategies should be employed to address these demographic changes, workforce planners should also consider the specific needs of the workforce and the organization. (1992, p. 3)

The needs and experiences of African American women in the federal workplace cannot simply be captured by identifying them with the issues of African Americans as a whole, combined with the concerns of women in general. The positionality of African American women requires the exploration of how race and gender as social constructs converge. The intersectionality of race and gender is a phenomenon that cannot be addressed by perceiving the two as being the sum of the whole; there must be an understanding of how the amalgamation of race and gender creates a new dynamic that

defines and brings into focus the essence of the professional development experience of African American women. The past and current impediments for federally employed African American women reveal an imperative for understanding how they experience professional development, and how the intersection of race and gender informs their professional development experience. It is through this understanding that organizations can begin to develop strategies and policies that address the needs of this historically marginalized group, which may assist in the human capital challenges experienced in organizations. High turnover rates, absenteeism, high numbers of EEO complaints and grievances, as well as workplace violence complaints, are all issues that organizations contend with, and have a correlation to the experiences of this study's population.

Problem Statement

Extant literature explores the professional development experiences of women in the workforce, as well as the status of minorities in the workforce. However, there is a dearth of available literature that examines the lived experiences of African American women in the workforce. There are numerous obstructions to professional development; however, the strategies used to address them may not equally benefit everyone. Bell (2004) argues that:

> Research on women in the labor force reveals that White women have been the beneficiaries of affirmative action programs. Although Black women may have access to jobs because of their dual status, this does not mean that they have equal access to opportunities for career advancement. (p. 151)

Henry-Brown and Campbell-Lewis (2005) contend that federal agencies' focus is misplaced, as they concentrate on increasing the numbers of women and minorities rather

than developing robust programs that help current women and minorities advance. Although research has been conducted on women and minorities in the workforce, little research has been conducted on the convergence of race and gender, and even less that specifically explores that intersection for African American women seeking professional development (Jordan-Zachery, 2007). Naff (2001) argues that:

> To appreciate the impact of demographic changes in the workforce, it is important to recognize that many formal policies and informal norms in the workplace still in effect today evolved at a time when the workforce in general, and upper management positions in particular, were dominated by Euro-American men. (p. 9)

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the intersectionality of race and gender for federally employed African American women through their lived experiences of professional development (see Figure 1). This study was designed to explore how African American women in the federal workforce make meaning out of their professional development experiences. In addition, one of the obstacles sited by the United States Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) *African American Workgroup Report* (2013) was social-organizational constructs that influence the experiences of African Americans. The researcher also sought to explore whether the participants perceived the existence of any social-organizational constructs they felt influenced their professional development experiences.

Significance of the Study

This research study of the lived experiences of federally employed African American women in pursuit of professional development will contribute to the limited body of qualitative literature on this topic. It provides a different viewpoint to the extant body of literature by exploring the convergence of race and gender for African American women in the federal workforce and how it informs their professional development. The insights provided by this study may assist federal leaders and supervisors in the development of more inclusive policies, procedures, and practices that integrate the developmental needs of a broader, more diverse base of employees.

During these fiscally challenging economic times, federal agencies face a range of ongoing and newly emerging challenges driven by budgetary constraints, a more demographically diverse workforce, and the changing role of the public sector. In an effort to assist agencies in managing these challenges, the United States GAO (1992) identified the following five key areas of human capital management: Strategic Workforce Planning, Workforce Training, Performance Management, Recruitment and Hiring, and Diversity. All of these key areas would benefit greatly with a deeper understanding of how African American women contribute to or are impacted by these practices. In addition, this study contributes to the field of conflict resolution by providing a deeper understanding of how the intersection of race and gender identities informs the professional development of African American women in the federal workforce. That understanding will provide better opportunities to more effectively address and manage conflicts stemming from their underrepresentation in higher-level positions. It also contributes to the understanding of workplace conflict experienced by

this population, which may inform policies developed by agencies that could help manage, reduce, or resolve those workplace conflicts. This study is also significant as the results may help to uncover discrimination or unconscious bias that can then be addressed.

Research Questions

The current qualitative study was guided by a review of the literature, which provides a context addressing the following questions:

1. What are the professional development experiences of African American women working in the federal government?

2. What, if any, challenges to professional development have been experienced by this population, and what meaning do they find in those experiences?

3. What are the perceptions of this population regarding how social-organizational constructs inform their professional development?

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this research was constructed around two major paradigms: Black feminist theory and organizational culture theory. The framework also incorporates segments of feminist theory and critical race theory, which provide background and substance to Black feminist theory. In addition, intersectionality theory and womanism are discussed to provide a more complete understanding of African American women's positionality. Each theory helps to explain the context and significance of the lived experiences of African American women, and their race and gender identities relating to their professional development. These theories are briefly

introduced here, and discussed at length in the following chapter as part of the review of literature relevant to this study.

  Black Feminist Theory. Black feminist theory was developed out of the realization that the existing paradigms examined the issues confronting White women and Black men, leaving Black women's interests unexplored (Bell 1990; Collins, 1989). Gopaldas (2013) agrees with Collins (1989) that, "[black women were] [a]lienated by both black men's and white women's movements, black women developed their own ways of conceptualizing social identity structures, not as independent axes of demographic classification but as interlocking matrices of privilege and oppression" (p. 90). Black feminist theory seeks to explore oppression, alienation, and marginalization of African American women within organizations (Byrd, 2009). It gives voice and expression to how African American women differ from White and other minority women, as well as from African American men. The focus of Black feminist theory provides an examination of how African American women experience power and development from their specific perspective. This study utilized Black feminist theory as an over-arching frame of reference to develop a more robust explanation, description, and understanding of this population through their distinct, expressed lived experience. Because African American women contend with the social constructs of race and gender in their daily experiences, it was imperative to utilize a theoretical framework that captured their experiences, not as an amalgamated experience by Blacks and by women, but as a distinct group based specifically on their positionality. Black feminist thought provides this study's framework for exploring how federally employed African American

women experience the duality of race and gender in their pursuit of professional development.

Organizational Culture Theory. If there is a lack of research on the professional development of African American women in the federal workforce, the paucity in the research on their perceptions of the impact of organizational culture is even more palpable. Organizational culture, a construct that crosses many fields from anthropology, sociology, industrial psychology, and business management to conflict resolution, is deeply imbedded in the day-to-day operations of agencies, both public and private. The inattention to organizational culture and its role in leadership development can create significant challenges from employees and groups operating within that culture. Edgar Schein (2004), one of the premier authorities on organizational culture, argues that:

> Culture is an abstraction, yet the forces that are created in social and organizational situations deriving from culture are powerful. If we don't understand the operation of these forces, we become victim to them. Cultural forces are powerful because they operate outside of our awareness. We need to understand them not only because of their power but also because they help to explain many of our puzzling and frustrating experiences in social and organizational life. Most importantly, understanding cultural forces enables us to understand ourselves better. (p. 7)

Organizational culture can have an extremely pervasive impact on how employees perceive their acceptance, identity, roles, and influence within a group and within the organization. The organizational culture theory (OCT) was used to explore how federally employed African American women perceive organizational culture, as well as if and

how it influences their professional development. The literature review includes aspects of organizational culture such as definitions, characteristics, components, and significance.

Definition of Terms

      African American/Black – Throughout the literature, the term African American is used interchangeably with the term Black, depicting individuals of African, non-Hispanic descent. Collins (2000) refers to it as a self-identified social category of race.

      Intersectionality – Intersectionality is a relatively new social theory that explores the manners in which race, gender, and social class interact. It refers to how multiple social constructs are interconnected layers that form identity (Gines, 2011).

      Professional Development – Throughout the literature, the term professional development is used interchangeably with the terms career development, career advancement, and leadership advancement. It refers to the advancement of skills, knowledge, and experience to succeed or advance in a chosen field. The goal of professional development is to align the employees' training and development with the organizational goals and objectives (U.S. OPM, 2005b). According to OPM,

> Employees' professional development should be an ongoing process to ensure employees are staying current—if not one step ahead—in their fields and mission-critical competencies. Planning for continuous development must be anchored to the agency's mission, goals, objectives, and needs, as well as be tied to the employee's work and career goals. (U.S. OPM, 2005b, p. 1)

Context of the Researcher

The impetus for this research study exploring how federally employed African American women experience professional development, is directly related to my own professional experiences navigating the career labyrinth, as well as my personal experience regarding my desire to ameliorate the African American community as a whole. Another motivation for this study is to serve as a *peacemaker*, as I work within my own community to help African American women better manage conflicts experienced in the workplace that are related (or perceived to be related) to their identity. It is through this path that I hope to help transform how our nation manages racialized and gendered conflict—working with the group to which I belong.

As an African American woman actively serving in the United States Air Force for over 20 years, I have served with a great number of dedicated, intelligent, and talented professionals who were ready, willing, and able to serve as a conduit for my professional growth. However, during that same time-period, I have also served with a number of callous, selfish, and disloyal people who were motivated by self-interest and not willing to assist others. Both groups have been instrumental in my development as an individual, and have informed my world-view, as I strive to emulate the first group and act contrary to the characteristics of the second.

As I transitioned from my military career in 2005, I chose to continue my public service by working in the federal government. It is during this time that I began to realize the need for this study. While working in Washington, D.C., where great numbers of African American women can be seen in the federal workforce, I noticed that there was a vast difference in their representation in the higher levels. Although, this was a known

fact, it feels differently when one perceives it personally. This revelation combined with my desire to give back to my community gave me a framework for where I wanted to begin. Once I decided to pursue a PhD, a family friend told me that whatever topic I chose, I needed to ensure that it was something that gave back to my community, which truly led me to begin my journey here—with this study.

Summary

This study serves to contribute to a more robust and fully-developed understanding of the professional development experience of federally employed African American, specifically intersectionality as it relates to race and gender identities for this population. Chapter one presented a framework and the theoretical underpinnings that describes the research problem and the need for the study. Black feminist theory and organizational culture theory were used to explore the lived experiences of the selected group. Chapter two presents a more detailed examination of the existing literature regarding the professional development of African American women in the federal workforce. It also provides an historical perspective on the intersectionality of race and gender and how it informs the identity of African American women. Chapter three provides a detailed explanation of the methodology and procedures used to explore this research topic. Chapter four presents the findings of the study, while chapter five presents a discussion of the findings, implications for practice, and the recommendations for future research.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

African Americans in the Federal Workforce

From 2001 through 2012, the percentage of African Americans in the federal workforce was greater than their representation in the CLF (U.S. Office of Personnel Management [OPM], 2001, 2002, 2003, 2004, 2005a, 2006, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2011, 2012). For Fiscal Year (FY) 2001, African Americans made up 17.7 percent of the federal workforce, compared to only 11.3 percent of the civilian labor force—a difference of 6.4 percent, and by FY 2012, they comprised 17.9 percent of the federal workforce and only 10.1 percent of the CLF (U.S. OPM, 2001, 2012).

However, these figures can be somewhat deceiving; despite their higher representation in the federal workforce, African Americans continue to be underrepresented in upper-level jobs (Daley, 1996; Jackson, 2009; Parham, 2002; Solomon, 2013; Starks, 2009). Although federal agencies have incorporated and implemented various strategies designed to explore areas of concern such as workplace composition and diversity, much of their efforts have been directed towards addressing overall representative numbers of women and minorities, and have not been specifically directed towards how these historically marginalized groups are represented at upper-levels (Mitchell, 2011). In 2010, the U.S. OPM (2010) reported that African Americans comprised 17.7 percent of the federal workforce. However, when broken down by grade groupings, the percentages change significantly. African Americans accounted for 24.7 percent of all employees in General Schedule and Related (GSR) grades 1 through 4, and 25.5 percent in GSR grades 5 through 8, but they only accounted for 12.8 percent of all

employees in GSR grades 13 through 15, and only 6.7 percent of senior pay levels (U.S. OPM, 2010).

Women in the Federal Workforce

The upward mobility barriers for women working in the federal government are also challenging; as of 2010, women accounted for 43.9 percent of the federal workforce, but when broken down by grade groupings, they represent 66 percent of all GSR grades 1-4 (U.S. OPM, 2010). Women make up well over half of those lower graded positions; however, they only constitute 37 percent of all GSR grades 13-15, and 31.2 percent of senior level grades (U.S. OPM, 2010). The percentages for the upper-level grades appear to be significantly higher than those cited for African Americans; however, the percentages for women represent all women, and do not take into account women of varying ethnicities.

The federal government has made great strides in creating a "representative bureaucracy"—however, the data collected focus on women and minorities—data do not specifically include women of color, or more specifically African American women (Naff, 2001). Although the 21st century ushered in a great deal of change for the federal workforce for women and minorities, more work is needed. The Government Accountability Office (GAO) Report stated:

[C]hanges in the number of women, minorities, and older workers in the federal government are real and can be addressed through a variety of human resource policies and programs such as child care, flexible work schedules, diversity training, and reemployment incentives. Demographic differences within the federal workforce indicate that different policies and programs may be needed in

different agencies and regions. In deciding which strategies should be employed to address these demographic changes, workforce planners should also consider the specific needs of the workforce and the organization. (U.S. GAO, 1992, p. 3)

Intersectionality

The needs and experiences of African American women cannot be understood by exploring the experiences of African Americans combined with the experiences of women. Their positionality requires examination of how race and gender as social constructs coalesce—intersectionality. Each individual's identity is an amalgamation of various social constructs, creating a multifaceted identity. Social constructs such as race, gender, class, sexual orientation, political affiliation, or other socially defined concepts intersect, informing the unique identity of the individual (Tyson, 2006). The convergence of race and gender is a phenomenon that cannot be addressed by perceiving the two as being the sum of the whole; there must be an understanding of how the amalgamation of race and gender creates a new dynamic that defines and brings into focus the essence of African American women's experiences.

Kimberle Crenshaw is credited with coining the term "intersectionality" in 1989 with her account of how race and gender intersect, and how that intersection informs the various dimensions of the experiences of African American women (Bowleg, 2012; Davis 2012; Gines, 2011; Gopaldas, 2013; Hulko, 2009). Although this is a dynamic worth exploring, research on the intersection of race and gender from the perspective of African American women is deficient (Bell, 1990; Byrd, 2009; Crenshaw, 1991; Collins, 2000; Mitchener, 2011; Scales, 2010; Stanley, 2009). Although "intersectionality" as a theoretical paradigm has been popular, the full complexity of the interlocking systems of

oppression have become adulterated, and specific exploration from the African American woman's perspective is sparse (Collins, 2000; Hulko, 2009). Relating intersectionality to public health, Bowleg (2012) argues that:

> The need for intersectionality as a unifying public health framework is further underscored by the relative dearth of theory and research that specifically address the multiple and interlocking influence of systems of privilege and oppression such as racism, sexism, and heterosexism. Instead, most public health research typically examines each system independently. (p. 1267)

The historical marginalization and dual socially constructed status of African American women positions them in a category unlike any other. Unlike their counterparts, they do not share a socially constructed category with the majority group— White men. African American men share gender in common with White men, and White women share race in common with White men (Terry, 2013).

When exploration, research, and theory fail to approach the paradigms of intersectionality from a comprehensive perspective, it can result in inaccuracies, misinformation, and confusion. Crenshaw (1991) argues that when overlapping identities are improperly viewed or analyzed independently, it can result in historically oppressed groups being overlooked. When organizations fail to consider the intersectionality of its marginalized groups, the result can be degraded policies, processes, programs, and structures. Risman (2004) argues that "There is now considerable consensus growing that one must always take into consideration multiple axes of oppression; to do otherwise presumes the whiteness of women, the maleness of people of color, and the heterosexuality of everyone" (p. 442).

Theoretical Framework

The concept of race has been studied, highly debated, and even disputed throughout American history, and it could be argued that since the inception of the United States, American society has only prescribed to a racialized worldview. Although this social construct was baggage transported to the United States by its Eurocentric hosts, racialization was fortified with the institution of slavery (Winant 2000). Winant argues,

> The idea of race began to take shape with the rise of a world political economy. The onset of global economic integration, the dawn of seaborne empire, the conquest of the Americas, and the rise of the Atlantic slave trade were all key elements in the genealogy of race. (p. 172)

The perceived necessity and urgency for unpaid labor reified the need for and use of slaves; however, that concept directly contradicted the rationale the settlers used for leaving Europe. Their struggle for independence and outcry for liberation and equality for all men rang hollow when applied to African Americans. To reconcile the two ideologies, White men developed, subscribed to, promulgated, and perpetuated the natural inferiority of African Americans. To justify the use of slaves, slave owners argued that African Americans could not be considered human and were essentially considered in the same category as "animal chattel" (Higginbotham, 1992, p. 257) .

If the subjugation and oppression of African Americans were not devastating enough, African American women were assigned another measure of marginalization, just for good measure. African American female slaves were not considered human, but were also not considered female, as demonstrated through Sojourner Truth's "Ar'n't I a

Woman?" (Higginbotham, 1992). Slavery gave slave owners rights over African American women's bodies, meaning the women not only toiled in the field as the African American men, but they were also brutalized sexually. Higginbotham stated, "While law and public opinion idealized motherhood and enforced the protection of white women's bodies, the opposite held true for black women's" (1990, p. 257).

To ensure the success of slavery, slave owners embarked upon a mission to demoralize, denigrate, and control African Americans through various historically documented means. One method employed was the use of dehumanization tactics such as stereotypes and controlling images which placed African American women in an extremely vicarious and ultimately dangerous position. Historically, African American women were assigned attributes that were in direct opposition to those of White women, for instance, White women were considered gentle, submissive, fragile, and pure (Tyson, 2006). However, African American women, who were forced into hard labor and put into vulnerable positions in which they could easily be raped and abused, were considered unwomanly, jezebels, mammies, or *sexually other* (Wilkins, 2012, p. 174). The continued promulgation of these stereotypes and controlling images that outlived slavery itself, gave way to the need for a deeper exploration into the African American condition as it related to race.

Critical Race Theory. With its beginnings in the 1970s, critical race theory arose from the continued discrimination and oppression of African Americans despite the passing of civil rights laws designed to ensure their equality. Pioneers of critical race theory who include Derrick Bell, Alan Freeman, Patricia Williams, Charles Lawrence, Lani Guiner, and Richard Delgado have expressed disappointment with the progress of

racial reform in the United States (Byrd & Stanley, 2009; Delgado & Stefancic, 1993; Jean-Marie, Williams, & Sherman, 2009; Taylor, 1998). Critical race theory explores the many and varied ways in which race and racism are ingrained into the fabrics of society and provides a mechanism for previously silenced voices of oppressed groups to give voice to their experience in a manner that overshadows the deeply embedded stereotypes and perceptions narrated by the dominant group (Byrd & Stanley, 2009; Creswell, 2013; Tyson, 2006). It centers on how racism has had a direct impact on the political, social, socio-economical, and legal systems in the United States that detrimentally pervades the lives of racial minorities.

Delgado and Stefancic (as cited in Tyson, 2006), offer six basic assumptions of critical race theory: 1) racism is a common everyday experience for minorities in the United States; 2) racism is the result of interest convergence; 3) race is a social construct; 4) racism presents through differential racialization; 5) individual identity is conceived by intersectionality; and 6) racial minorities possess a unique position, which is given voice. This is what is referred to as a 'counterstory,' which is a unique aspect of critical race theory. It is an oppositional story to the 'master narrative' created by the dominant group. Taylor (1998) offers several themes of critical race theory that are similar to the assumptions offered by Delgado and Stefancic, postulating that racism is a normal part of daily American life, so much so that the White superiority mindset is so embedded in American culture that it is difficult to detect or even recognize.

Taylor (1998) points to another critical race theory theme offered by Derrick Bell, namely interest convergence. Interest convergence stipulates that efforts toward racial equality are 'legitimized' by the participation of powerful Whites. This tenet of critical

race theory offers that the interests of African Americans are only met when the interests of Whites are also met. Bell (1980) argues, "Racial remedies may instead be the outward manifestations of unspoken and perhaps subconscious judicial conclusions that the remedies, if granted, will secure, advance, or at least not harm societal interests deemed important by middle and upper class whites." (p. 523) Another commonly held theme of critical race theory is that it contextualizes a group's experiences with racism, discrimination, and oppression through the use of narratives, story-telling, or counter-stories, challenging the dominant discourse (Byrd & Stanley, 2009).

While African American men have been, and continue to be oppressed by the dominant group—White men—their gender is a possible unifying force that provides a commonality between them. Thus, although African American men contend with their own unique challenges such as overrepresentation in prisons and underrepresentation in the workforce, they do not contend with the duality of oppressive forces due to their race and gender. Walker (2011) argued, "Men can be categorized as intersectionally privileged in terms of gender, due to the systems of power that perpetuate male dominance in a variety of sectors" (p. 85). Although critical race theory provides the foundation for the redress of oppression and discrimination by marginalized groups from a more holistic approach, it still leaves a void that can only be filled by a paradigm that informs specifically from the African American women's viewpoint.

Feminism. Feminism emerged in the 1960s in an attempt to effectuate social justice and equality for women through advocacy, prevention, and empowerment (Tyson, 2006). Feminist theory argues that women contend with a patriarchal society that has historically marginalized and oppressed women and has developed systems that serve to

propagate the unequal treatment of women. Patriarchy can be defined as a culture that promotes traditional gender roles that allow men greater privileges while restricting the status, position, and opportunities for women (Creswell, 2013; Tyson, 2006). Patriarchal systems cast women in an inferior light, subscribing to them characteristics and traits that are "anti-leadership," based on "traditional" gender roles validated by the system, subsequently "creat[ing] the failure that it then uses to justify its assumptions about women" (Tyson, 2006, p. 87). Gender roles, or traditional gender roles, refer to the way that men and women are assigned specific characteristics, for instance, viewing men as strong, logical, rational, and protective, and women as weak, illogical, irrational, and nurturing (Tyson, 2006). The goal of feminism, according to Bond and Mulvey (2000), is "empowering women, challenging gender-related restrictions, and ultimately dismantling social and political hierarchies that disadvantage not only women but also other marginalized groups" (pp. 600-601). Feminist theorists postulate that traditional gender roles and socialization of those roles contribute to perpetuation of the 'habit of seeing' that causes society to view both genders through the male experience, neglecting the experience of female (Tyson, 2006). Additionally, Tyson (2006) posits that it is through traditional gender roles that justification for the exclusion of women from or having access to opportunities for leadership positions is developed and reified.

Feminist discourse makes a clear distinction between the biological aspects of sex versus the sociological constructs of gender. The word *sex* denotes the biological make-up of males and females, whereas *gender* captures the culturalization or socialization of characteristics prescribed as inherently feminine or masculine (Tyson, 2006).

Feminism explores the human experience of being, and calls into question how and why we perceive ourselves and others as we do. Although feminists share various basic assumptions (women's oppression, existence of patriarchal systems, distinction between sex and gender, and fight for women's equality), women who reside in other socially constructed categories have different experiences that are not shared by all women (i.e., women of color). Feminist scholarship regards the discourse on leadership to be drawn from the experiences and perspectives of White males, relegating 'others' to view their experiences through the lens of White males, creating what W.E.B Dubois refers to 'double-consciousness' (as cited in Bell, 1990).

With regards to leadership, women are evaluated based on criteria developed by White males, for White males, without consideration for qualities, characteristics, or strengths not typically considered desirable, but which can be effective in leadership roles (Bell, 1990; Davis, 2012). Furthermore, Bell (1990) argues that career development research on women typically speaks to the White female experience. While feminist scholarship has contributed significantly to the understanding of women's positionality in terms of professional development, the data is incomplete when applied to the experiences of African American women. As Bell (1990) posits, the various sub-groups of women, especially those in other disadvantaged groupings, differ from those of White women. Tyson (2006) most convincingly argued:

> [W]hite, middle-class, hetereosexual feminists who have always held the most
> visible positions of leadership in women's movements in America, are finally
> recognizing the ways in which their policies and practices have reflected their
> own experiences while ignoring the experiences of women of color, lesbians, and

poor, undereducated women both in America and throughout the world. While all women are subject to patriarchal oppression, each woman's specific needs, desires, and problems are greatly shaped by her race, socioeconomic class, sexual orientation, educational experience, religion, and nationality. (p. 105)

Understanding the professional development experiences of African American women requires a perspective provided by a paradigm that considers the duality of their position within two marginalized groups.

Black Feminist Thought. Although critical race theory was important and helpful in addressing racialized injustices against minority groups, it lacked the specificity needed by African American women, based on their unique standpoint. Furthermore, early feminist theories explored sexism from the vantage point of White women, subsequently generalizing the concept to include women in general, thus becoming the voice of all women, while failing to recognize the unique standpoints of women of color, i.e., African American women (Bell, 1990; Byrd, 2002; Collins, 1989). "While some traditional theories provide frameworks that are adaptable enough to conform to any group's development, Black feminist thought is more specific in its integration, validation, and centering of Black women's unique realities, perceptions, and experiences" (Easley, 2011, p. 51).

Many Black feminist scholars posit that in order to get a richer, clearer, and deeper understanding of the African American women's experience, their experiences must be explored based on the convergence of the various social categories to which they belong, such as race, gender, and social class (Bell, 1990; Byrd, 2009; Collins, 1989; Crenshaw, 1991). Black feminist scholarship developed out of the need of African

American women to combat marginalization and oppression through the insertion and assertion of their specific voices in the struggle for social justice. It centers on the empowerment of African American women in the attainment of social justice. Some of the early Black feminist theorists include Kimberle Crenshaw, bell hooks, Patricia Hill Collins, and Ella Louise Bell. A basic tenet of Black feminist thought is that intersecting oppressions such as racism and sexism must be addressed to ensure the empowerment of African American women (Byrd & Stanley, 2009).

The African American woman's position or "standpoint" is unlike any other with multiple oppressions of race, gender, class, and the legacy of slavery providing a unique experience that has been historically marred in conflict. In her work exploring intersectional identities, Amy Wilkins (2012) posits that transecting social constructs can create paradoxical locations. She offers:

> [T]he intersections of gender, race, and class more generally, and controlling images of black women specifically, contain cultural contradictions that create difficult, if not untenable, social positions…When black women resist one controlling image, they activate another; for example, black women who do not act like mammies are seen as jezebels. Controlling images work together in such a way to make it impossible for black women to occupy an "ordinary," namely, unmarked, social position. (p. 175)

African American women contend with having to balance their identities with their external environment in the context of socially determined categories, prescribed by the dominant group's way of knowing.

The complexity of the struggle faced by African American women gave rise to the explication of the nature of identity intricacies within this group, which required deeper exploration. The diversity of African American women as a group in terms of other social constructs such as social class and sexuality, created additional challenges. Smith (2002) admits that Black feminism was inadequate in capturing the totality of her multiple identities and experiences: "Race and gender are important components in her [Hill] theory, but I still felt excluded because my roots and inseparable connection with the continent where I was born and live was not foregrounded in the theory" (p. 108). As African American women (especially scholars) began to consider their varying perspectives in relation to Black feminism, there was a realization for many that Black feminism failed to capture their complete experience. Consequently, another philosophy surfaced in response to those perceived deficiencies—*womanism*.

Womanism. Alice Walker's *womanism* emerged not as a counter to Black feminist thought but more as an outgrowth of it, addressing the more intricate, invisible aspects of African American women's identity (Collins, 1996). Walker (2008) posited,

When I offered the word "Womanism" many years ago, it was to give us a tool to use, as feminist women of color, in times like these. These are the moments we can see clearly, and must honor devotedly, our singular path as women of color in the United States. We are not white women and this truth has been ground into us for centuries, often in brutal ways. But neither are we inclined to follow a black person, man or woman, unless they demonstrate considerable courage, intelligence, compassion and substance. (p. 46)

While many African American women view both terms as being interchangeable, there are other segments of this population that perceive distinctions between the two, creating some controversy (Collins, 1996). The subtle nuances or differences between Black feminism and womanism led to a philosophical debate regarding the appropriate term that should be used to address the interlocking systems of oppressions affecting African American women. Black feminist theory is perceived by some to be too closely tied to feminism, which they feel alienates men (particularly African American men). A number of others embrace womanism for its proclivity for relationship building between African American women and men. Collins (1996) argued, "Several difficulties accompany the use of the term 'black feminism.' One involves the problem of balancing the genuine concerns of black women against continual pressures to absorb and recast such interests within white feminist frameworks" (p. 14). Tyson (2006) contended,

> On the other hand, some black women feel that feminism is a divisive force in the black community. As a result, some have either abandoned feminism or sought ways to reconcile it with the concerns of the black community, as Alice Walker did when she called herself a 'womanist' because she works for the survival and wholeness of her people, men and women both. (p. 107)

A clear distinction between womanism and Black feminism, for some, is the conversation surrounding sexuality. For some in the African American community, feminism is associated with lesbianism, which in turns creates dissonance between community support and spiritual belief systems (Collins, 1996). Both of the terms Black feminism and womanism are problematic in fully addressing the duality of oppression experienced

by African American women; however, the absence of a comprehensive term does not preclude the necessity for continued work.

As previously mentioned, many African American women use the terms Black feminism and womanism interchangeably, and as the nuances between the two are not germane to this study, the researcher chose to employ the term Black feminism universally.

Black feminist scholarship provides a framework for contextualizing the epistemology of African American women, describing and interpreting their experience with oppression and marginalization, and helping them to give voice to their new found way of knowing. Epistemology can be described as understanding how we know what we know, and for Black feminist theory, epistemology operates within three primary contexts: the African American female scholars as the professional knower, African American women who contribute to the existing story concerning African American women, and African American women who tell their own stories (Collins, 2000; Terry, 2013). For African American women, Jean-Marie et al. (2009) contend that despite their omission, devaluation, and misinterpretation, they are linked by their shared African American epistemology, which is useful when dealing with racism and sexism. The interconnectedness of African American women provides insight for understanding how their epistemology informs their relationships amongst themselves, in their professions, in their communities, and within their families.

While Black feminist thought serves as a nexus for African American women, it also provides a framework for the deconstruction of the dominant discourse, activating a reconstruction that allows them to incorporate their perspective. This opportunity,

according to Black feminist thought, provides the opportunity for the inclusion of a narrative that embraces 'their story.'

Black feminists argue that it is imperative that their story, or the narrative of African American women, include their perspective, which in turn must include a *self-definition*, a characterization of self that helps African American women "give voice to their own messages without filter or interpretation by others" (Hunt, 2011, p. 29). Self-definition is an empowering concept that allows and calls for African American women to describe and express themselves through the rejection of stereotypical images imposed upon them and to create one that reflects their reality (Byrd & Stanley, 2009; Collins, 1986). The importance of African American women's self-definition is characterized by Collins (1986) when she stated:

> When Black women define themselves, they clearly reject the taken-for-granted assumption that those in positions granting them the authority to describe and analyze reality are entitled to do so. Regardless of the actual content of Black women's self-definitions, the act of insisting on Black female self-definition validates Black women's power as human subjects. (p. S17)

In addition to self-definition as a theme in Black feminist theory, the 'standpoint' of African American women is also critically important. Standpoint can be described as the vantage point from which a person or group views reality, and helps to determine what is perceived and what is obscured (Hunt, 2011). According to Collins (1989), standpoint is described by two interlocking components: the experiences of African American women through economic and political status, and secondly, because of those experiences, an African American women's consciousness concerning 'their reality'

materializes (Collins, 1989). Because the standpoint of African American women is distinct, in that it differs from that of White men and women, and from Black men, expressing it requires the use of different techniques from those used by others (Collins, 1989). The standpoint of African American women requires a greater understanding and further exploration of their experience based on their own narrative, as their standpoint reflects in every aspect of their lives, including how to develop professionally.

African American women differ from White women or African American men in how they experience professional development; they must exercise a greater deal of self-reliance in their efforts, as support may be difficult to garner. Role models and mentors with requisite power in the organization who would be able to guide and support them may be scarce or at least challenging to locate and obtain. Bell (1990) argued:

It may be especially difficult for them [African American women] to find sponsors who will open doors to new opportunities, or mentors who can provide guidance for moving up the organizational hierarchy. Without powerful advocates, the women often find themselves omitted from important organizational networks and isolated from people who can help hone their professional skills. Consequently, they are forced to navigate uncharted waters when seeking ways to fulfill their career goals. (p. 460)

Considering the uniqueness of the professional developmental needs of African American women based on their intersectionality and multiple oppressions, one would expect to find a plethora of literature on career development for this group. However, Hunt (2011) posits that there is a scarcity of research that explores how race and gender inform career

development. The next section provides a context and discussion of professional development.

Professional Development

One of the prevalent programs within organizations that ubiquitously impacts organizational members is employee development. Employee development is a term that has been referred to by many names—career development, career advancement, and leadership development. Bond and Mulvey (2000) refer to women's professional development as ensuring their visibility and increased ability to access power and reward when functioning in and around professional groups or entities. Although these terms hold a slightly different and nuanced meaning, they have been, and are still used interchangeably. This study incorporates various aspects of these concepts, providing a brief insight into each, but uses the term professional development as an umbrella to encapsulate all three concepts.

Career Advancement. Career advancement refers to the advancement through career ladders as upward mobility that drives individuals into higher-level and better paying positions; it denotes an upward progression toward a higher goal or level—climbing the proverbial "corporate ladder" (Chen, Roy, & Gotway Crawford, 2010; Moon, 2013). Career advancement also refers to how individuals grow professionally, though coaching, mentoring, and stretch assignments that provide job or career benefits (Webb, 2014). The term career advancement and its definition do not capture the full scope of an individual's experience with regard to his or her career. For example, career advancement does not describe leadership or the ability to persuade or move other employees towards a goal or mission.

Leadership Development. Persuasion of others to perform tasks they would not normally choose to perform can be used to typify leadership as a social construct. Various definitions, from a host of disciplines, have been offered to describe the concept of leadership, creating a dissonance amongst researchers. The multitude of leadership ideologies gave birth to a host of leadership theories, such as great man, classical, trait, transactional, transformational, and situational, just to name a few. Leadership as a social construct has been explored from a host a fields, ranging from psychology, anthropology, and sociology to conflict resolution and organizational development. King and Ferguson (2001), when addressing leadership development as it applies to African American women, define leadership development as consisting of:

(1) the activities, processes, and methods that aid in clarifying a woman's understanding of herself in relation to the groups, communities, and societies of which she is apart and (2) the activities, processes, and methods the aid in clarifying a woman's sense of personal efficacy and collective purpose. (p. 126)

Another definition of leadership is one provided by Van Wart (2013), who posits that leadership encompasses a host of abilities such as influencing others towards forward movement, changing organizations, and providing a vision. Although various definitions have been offered to describe the concept of leadership, many of the early definitions and descriptions had been historically associated with White males (Witherspoon, 2009). Moreover, many early theorists embraced the "Great Man Theory" of leadership, which argued that leaders are born and not groomed or developed (Conger, 2004; Davis, 2012; Wilkerson, 2008). More contemporary schools of thought about leadership have argued that great man theories were conceptualized during a time when the commonly held

images of leaders were White male, lending to the perception that great man theories reinforced non-leadership stereotypes for women and minorities (Davis, 2012; Marshall, 1993; Ott, 1989; Schein, 2004; Wilkerson, 2008). Leadership development is influenced by a host of factors such as genetics, experiences, environment, culture, education and training, role models, and relationships (Conger, 2004). Since leadership development is shaped by so many factors, it would stand to reason that it would be experienced differently by various groups having beneficial or detrimental associations with such factors, such as African American women who have historically been marginalized by both their race and their sex.

What distinguishes leadership development from career development or advancement is that the focus is not only on the individual being developed; there is an added focus on others, i.e., group or team members. Although this study uses the terms leadership, professional, and career development interchangeably, the researcher explored the nuances of meaning of all three; career development is explored in the section below.

Career Development Theory. Careers have traditionally been viewed as the individual's progression in and relationship with the same stable, structured organization (Levinson, 1978; Solomon, 2013; Sullivan & Baruch, 2009; Super, 1957). Researchers have characterized the traditional relationship as one in which the employer exercised a more paternalistic role, taking care of the employee, with the expectation of loyalty, in exchange for job security (Schein, 1996; Sullivan & Baruch, 2009). The conventional goal of career development from the organization's perspective was to ensure the success of 'the bottom line,' by developing employees to meet organizational strategic goals.

Hunt (2011) asserts that "The primary initial goal of career development interventions was to ensure that there were individuals trained and available to meet the changing needs of the organization as technology and globalization expanded" (p. 41). However, a host of changes, such as technological advances, changes in family structure, economics, and workforce diversity, has precipitated a transformation in how employers and employees perceive career development. Sullivan and Baruch argued :

> [I]ndividuals are also changing their career attitudes and behaviors in response to many factors, including increasing life spans and hence work lives; changing family structures, including the increasing number of dual-career couples, single working parents, and employees with eldercare responsibilities; and the growing number of individuals seeking to fulfill needs for personal learning, development, and growth. (p. 1543)

These, as well as other changes have spurred employees to action, taking more of an active and proactive position in characterizing, defining, and pursuing their careers. This transformation of careers and career development is a result of employees circumnavigating their careers outside of the scope and needs of the paternalistic organization, and attending to their developmental needs that have also evolved over time. Employees are no longer beginning and ending their careers with the same organization, but pursuing opportunities for advancement wherever they may be, which changes the definition of a career.

Definition of Career Development. A career can be defined in a number of ways, causing great debate among scholars, which helps to explain why there is no commonly held definition on which they agree. In addressing the definition of career

development, Gilley, Eggland, and Gilley (2002) argue that two questions must be answered: 1) what is actually intended by the term 'development', and 2) what actually occurs with regard to development within organizations (p. 5). Sullivan and Baruch's (2009) definition holds that a career is "an individual's work-related and other relevant experiences, both inside and outside of organizations that form a unique pattern over the individual's life span" (p. 1543). Moreover, Sullivan and Baruch argue that there are many other factors external to the organization that inform the individual's career, such as relationships and other personal influences. Schein (2004) most succinctly captures the contemporary views of the organization and the individual when he stated that "[b]oth the organization and the individual are gradually adjusting to the notion that they have to look out for themselves, meaning that organizations will become less paternalistic and individuals more self-reliant" (p. 83).

Career development has become a very popular topic, prompting interest from various disciplines from psychology, sociology, and management, to human resource development, with scholars offering models to explore concerns within their fields. One such model is that offered by Donald E. Super, who conceptualized careers as a series of developmental stages, a model that has been informing the work of researchers and practitioners (Giannantonio & Hurley-Hanson, 2006). Super's model introduced career development that spans an individual's life-cycle in five distinct stages: 1) the growth stage, which is the initiation into the 'working world' and where self-concept begins to develop; 2) the exploration stage, where individuals begin to match self-concept with interests, skills, and stereotypes about the working world are refined; 3) establishment, when individuals begin interest in career advancement; 4) maintenance, when individuals

attempt to preserve their job status and image of themselves; and 5) disengagement, when individuals assert their independence from work and focus on self-concept (Giannantonio & Hurley-Hanson, 2006).

Another model for career development is from the pioneering works of Edgar H. Schein, who introduced the concept of career anchors (Schein, 1996). Career anchors refer to those elements within an individual's self-concept that help define how he or she perceives his or her talents and skills, as well as career oriented values and needs (Schein, 1996). Initially Schein offered five anchors, but later works included three others: 1) Autonomy/independence, 2) Security/stability, 3) Technical-functional competence, 4) General Managerial competence, 5) Entrepreneurial creativity, 6) Service or dedication to a cause, 7) Pure challenge, and 8) Life Style (1996, p. 80). Career anchors, according to Schein (1996), are the things that individuals, who are forced to make a choice, will not give up. Individuals typically are unaware of career anchors until they are forced to make a choice regarding their values (Schein, 1996). Career anchors do not surface as a zero-sum experience; it is possible to attribute values and needs to several different anchors simultaneously or during different stages of a career.

Professional Development for African American Women. The social constructs of race and gender converge, which creates a distinct experience for groups who contend with multiple identities. That experience is significantly different from groups who contend with belonging to only one socially constructed identity. Specifically in the case of African American women, the amalgamation of race and gender causes their dual status to create a unique positionality that significantly informs their professional development. In their article, "Black Women's Leadership Experiences:

Examining the Intersectionality of Race and Gender," authors Jean-Marie Gaetane, Vicki Williams, and Sheila Sherman (2009) explore the intersection of race and gender in relation to the leadership experiences of African American women in education. They argue that their study is useful for understanding the experiences of this population in other contexts and fields as well. The authors used a narrative approach to capture the life stories of 12 African American women working in academia. One of the findings in the study was that a number of the participants reported experiencing racial and gender discrimination during their pursuit of educational aspirations and professional career goals. Additionally, some of the participants in the study asserted that they also encountered the intersection of race and gender bias. For instance, the authors relayed an event from one of the participants in the study who was a student in law school who felt that pursuing education in the South was onerous. She shared,

> It was one professor who was very conservative. He thought Blacks coming to the [White law school] were not capable. He never called on me the whole time I was in his class. It was one of those classes that went both semesters. Everybody was in it. He called on everybody. They told you, you must be prepared because he calls on everybody at least once. Once you get called on, you didn't have to worry the rest of the time because he had these others to cover. *He never called on me.* I thought certainly on the last day of class he would call me. He never did. That whole year I was the only person that he did not call on.
>
> After the final exam and semester ended, he walked up to me and said, "Ms. [Wilson], what did you make in my class?" When I told him, his mouth

dropped. Literally dropped. He then said, "Well congratulations! He went on

down the hall probably feeling, "how did she manage to do that?" (p 571)

According to Jean-Marie et al. (2009), the participants in the study attributed their

experiences with racism, sexism, gender bias, and racial bias as the impetus for helping

them to develop an inclusive, consensus-building, and collaborative leadership style.

African American women's experience is relatively absent from the discourse on

professional development; much of the literature is based on a Eurocentric model, rather

than one that incorporates conditions, ideas, and concepts that are relevant to their

experience and identity (Pearson & Bieschke, 2001). Byrd and Stanley (2009) most

appropriately capture this concept:

> The voices (perspectives) of African American women leaders are virtually silent
>
> in the literature. Generally what is read, taught, and learned about leaders is from
>
> the perspective of the dominant discourse. Because this discourse does not
>
> typically bring out issues that African American women leaders experience,
>
> encounters that emerge from an interlocking system of race, gender, and social
>
> class have been rendered silent. (p. 658)

Understanding the reality experienced by African American women would bring a

perspicacity regarding their access to career development opportunities. Although there

has been significant progress made for both socio-constructed groups to which they

belong, the multiplying effect caused by the intersection of those groups situates African

American women in a more marginalized position (Bell, 2004). African American

women have the intellect, motivation, and capacity to succeed; however, there are various

other contributing factors that they may or may not have access to which influence their

success. In describing the potential for success for African Americans as a whole, Riley (2006) asserted that, "[E]xecutive success can be achieved by African Americans if the secret code for corporate success is revealed by those who have already achieved that success" (p. 63).

Professional development theory appears to operate on various 'basic assumptions' that have been generated from developmental models designed for and by White males. In their work on career management, Granrose and Portwood (1987) argued that the most common reasons for organizations to get involved in individual career planning depends on the assumption that the individual's efforts will lead to success, the assumption that individual confidence in the organization's plans and his or her opportunities lead to success, and the assumption that the individual will be committed to the organization when provided knowledge of career options. However, the authors also recognize that individual characteristics or experiences (such as perceived discrimination) have an impact on how and if the individual will seek out or participate in career management programs (Granrose & Portwood, 1987). If individuals who are members of marginalized groups perceive disparate treatment, they may be less aware of or inclined to take advantage of professional development opportunities provided to others.

Assumptions regarding professional development pervade the discourse on the subject, albeit at times without due consideration to ethnic minorities and women. As previously noted, a significant number of theoretical models on career development were conceptualized by and for White males, which calls into question the very nature or premise of the theoretical underpinnings for such models in regards to the efficaciousness for other groups (Bell, 1990; Hunt, 2011; Jean-Marie et al., 2009) Measuring or

providing a specific career development model as 'one size fits all,' without giving due consideration to systemic variables with potentially pervasive impact on outcomes can be misleading at the least, and potentially problematic at worst (Leong, 1995).

Organizational Culture

Historically, culture has been a somewhat nebulous term used to describe a host of socially constructed concepts, such as an interpretation of a level of societal refinement, a characterization of a group's customs and rituals, or a description of a climate or an atmosphere (Bolman & Deal, 2008; Schein, 2004). The dynamics of an organization are continuously influenced by and reflected in its culture. Ott (1989) argues that "organizational culture is a way of looking at and thinking about behavior of and in organizations, a perspective for understanding what is occurring" (p. 1). Acker (2006) contends that organizations maintain various practices, processes, and actions that maintain and perpetuate inequities within the social constructs of race, gender, and class. Culture helps to form the contexts and perceptions employees' formulate, as well as how they are perceived in relation to others operating within that same organizational culture. Moreover, organizational culture affects all aspects of organizational life for employees. The effects of organizational culture on employees can be better understood by realizing its function. Organizational culture provides group members with a sense of identity and a connection between one another, it shapes the behavior of the group members by shared norms built on group experiences, and it provides stability for the group (Edgerson, 2004). Ott (1989) offers four core functions of organizational culture:

1. It provides shared patterns of cognitive interpretations or perceptions, so organization members know how they are expected act and think;

2. It provides shared patterns of affect an emotional sense of involvement and commitment to organizational values and moral codes—of things worth working for and believing in—so organizational members know what they are expected to value and how they are expected to feel;

3. It defines and maintains boundaries, allowing identification of members and non-members; and,

4. It functions as an organizational control system, prescribing and prohibiting certain behaviors. (p. 68)

Schein (2004) also posits that there are four basic problems that each member of the organization must contend with or solve: 1) Identity and Role, addressing who each person is as a member of the group; 2) Power and Influence, determining whether or not the individual's needs regarding influence will be met; 3) Needs and Goals, perceiving whether meeting the group's goals will help the individual achieve his or her own goals; and 4) Acceptance and Intimacy, relating to whether or not the individual will feel accepted and respected in and by the group (p. 179).

Experts across a multitude of disciplines present varying descriptions and definitions of organizational culture that are reflective of the epistemology and axiology of the field that offers the definition. Schein (2004) defines organizational culture as

a pattern of shared basic assumptions that was learned by a group as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration that has worked well enough to be considered valid, and therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems. (p. 17)

Bolman and Deal (2008) argue that "An organization's culture is built over time as members develop beliefs, values, practices, and artifacts that seem to work and are transmitted to new recruits" (p. 278). Patnaik (2011) posits that culture can be defined as the values and norms embraced by a group, that dictate the manner in which they relate to one another and others associated with, but outside of the organization. Letcher (2014) defines it as "a system of shared beliefs, norms, values, assumptions, and learned behaviors in organizations that are passed on to new members" (p. 1). Crews and Richard (2013) characterize organizational culture as "the status quo, nature of the business, the way we do things, etc." (p. 73).

Although there is a degree of contention on the specific definitions of organizational culture, scholars seem to agree on several general principles surrounding organizational culture, such as the basic components: shared values, beliefs, norms, and feelings (Bajdo & Dickson, 2001; Bolman & Deal, 2008; Patnaik, 2011; Schein 2004).

Components. Schein (2004) asserts that in order to understand organizational culture, it would be helpful to analyze it from the various levels at which culture may manifest (be observable to the perceiver). He offers three levels or components: artifacts, the most basic, superficial level that can encompass structures and processes; espoused beliefs and values, which is the shared mission, values, goals, and strategies; and basic underlying assumptions, which are unconscious beliefs, perceptions, and thoughts (Schein, 2004).

At the most cursory level of Schein's model are artifacts, which are the phenomenon that can be experienced or perceived at sensory levels, such as organizational structures, processes, symbols, rituals, and ceremonies—those elements

that can be heard, seen, or felt (Bolman & Deal, 2008; Schein, 2004). While artifacts are the easiest of the three components to observe, they are extremely difficult to accurately interpret and understand. It is at this level that an outside observer would begin to perceive the internal dynamics of an organization. However, to confirm the accuracy of those perceptions, and the true meaning for the group, a deeper exploration is required.

An examination of espoused beliefs and values, the second level, provides an observer with a richer understanding of an organization's culture. This is a deeper level and similar to artifacts in that it also operates on the conscious level. However, Patnaik (2011) asserts that "At this level, local and personal values are widely expressed within the organization" (p. 83). As challenges are encountered and resolved by the group, within the confines of the expressed beliefs and values, the group begins to readily accept those successful occurrences as the embraced group ideology (Edgerson, 2004; Schein, 2004). Locke (2005) argues that "Espoused values also come into being because they help the organization solve its problems of internal integration and response to the external environment" (p. 32).

The deepest, most complex of Schein's model is the basic underlying assumption level, resulting from the successes experienced in overcoming previous challenges. Schein (2004) posits that "When a solution to a problem works repeatedly, it comes to be taken for granted. What was once a hypothesis, supported only by a hunch or a value, gradually comes to be treated as a reality" (p. 30). Because basic underlying assumptions operate at the subconscious level and are so integrated into the group's belief system, they are extremely difficult to change (Edgerson, 2004; Locke, 2005; Patnaik, 2011; Schein, 2004).

Dimensions of Organizational Culture. According to Schein (2004), problems that groups face help define the content of organizational culture, which are reflected in how organizations handle their external environment and manage their internal integration. Internal integration provides a framework for a better understanding of how organizational culture relates to the experiences of the chosen population, so for the purpose of this study, the researcher focused on internal integration.

For groups or organizations to function effectively, there are a host of internal issues that must be managed such as the dynamics of relationships amongst the members, how power is distributed within the group, how resources are allocated, how roles and responsibilities are defined, or establishment of the rules of engagement. Although this is not a complete list of the internal issues that groups and organizations manage, Schein (2004) offers six major issues they must handle. He argues that groups must contend with: establishing a common language from which they can communicate; defining limits, norms, and criteria for who is in and who is out; dispensing of power and authority of group members; developing group norms relating to intimacy, friendship, and love; establishing parameters for the allocation of rewards and punishment; and dealing with and explaining 'unexplainable' occurrences (Schein, 2004).

Power, Influence, Authority, and Status. Power, influence, and status are dimensions of organizational culture that are critical aspects of organizational development. Every organization has to contend with the internal distribution of power, influence, authority, and status (Schein 2004). Organizations are comprised of diverse individuals and groups who possess varying perceptions, beliefs, assumptions, and interests, which are in perpetual competition for scarce organizational resources, such as

promotions, positions, awards, or increased operating budgets (Ott, 1989). The dimension of power, influence, authority, and status as perceived by Marshall (1993) are mostly informed by men, as they are perceived as being the dominate force in building organizational culture. However, some may not recognize their influence or authority, while others may. Acker argues that

> [v]isibility varies with the position of the beholder: One privilege of the privileged is not to see their privilege. Men tend not to see their gender privilege; whites tend not to see their race privilege; ruling class members tend not to see their class privilege…People in dominant groups generally see inequality as existing somewhere else, not where they are (p. 452).

If organizational culture is highly influenced by the perceptions, beliefs, values, and basic assumptions of its members, one could conclude that those members' views on gender and race would also influence the culture (Marshall, 1993; Schein, 2004). Acker (1993) succinctly captures this concept when she argues that "Organizational culture is also reinforced by traditional sex role stereotypes and by social patterns of power" (p. 316). She also concludes that women in organizations do not have the same seat at the table when it comes to power; they are in an abstruse position that they are unable to articulate or demonstrate to others. Gender and race are social constructs that must be explored to better understand how power, influence, authority, and status operate within organizations (Collins, 1986). Schein's (2004) contention most accurately captures this idea.

> In the United States we are also discovering, through a painful process of consciousness-raising, how gender- and race-related assumptions come to be so

taken for granted that they function to create de facto kinds of discrimination through stereotyping and the creation of various kinds of barriers such as "glass ceilings." In these areas many culture researchers have found the best evidence of culture conflict and genuine ambiguities about roles, influencing even the kinds of problems that researchers have identified and studied. (p. 186)

Leadership. Another dimension of organizational culture is that of leadership, as it is one of the dimensions that has one of the greatest impacts on organizational culture, while at the same time is impacted by it. When exploring the sources of organizational culture, researchers conclude that leaders play a starring role in its creation (Bennis, 1989; Locke, 2005; Ott, 1989; Schein, 2004). Coleman (2014) argues that "The culture of the organization develops through the influence of its leaders while the culture also affects the development of its leadership" (p. 32). The culture of an organization begins with and is ultimately created by its leaders. This concept is summed up succinctly by Schein (2004) who states that "leadership and culture are two sides of the same coin" (p. 1). Leaders give birth to organizational culture from the very foundation of the corporation, institution, or establishment. The values, beliefs, experiences, and basic assumptions of the legacy leaders build the foundation for how members will perceive, think, behave, and feel, and how they treat others in the organization (Ott, 1989). Schein (2004) argues that cultures are developed by three sources: the leaders' values, beliefs, and assumptions; the group members' experiences through the growth and development of the organization; and the new group members' values, beliefs, and assumptions. Furthermore, Schein asserts that "the most important for cultural beginnings is the impact of founders" (2004, p. 226). However, Ott (1989) contends that the three sources of

organizational culture are: "The broader societal culture in which an organization resides, [t]he nature of an organization's business or business environment, [and][t]he beliefs, values, and basic assumptions held by the founder(s) or other early dominant leader(s)" (p. 75). Although Schein and Ott differ somewhat on their perceptions of the origins of organizational culture, they both agree that the leaders' values, beliefs, and basic assumptions are of great significance.

Schein (2004) argues that leaders have essentially six primary tools, or what he terms 'embedding mechanisms,' that help facilitate teaching members how to think, feel, perceive, and behave. The first of Schein's (2004) six embedding mechanisms is the concept of 'what leaders pay attention to,' which he argues is one of the most powerful instruments in demonstrating their belief system or what is important to them. The second embedding mechanism is leaders' reactions to organizational crisis. When a crisis occurs in an organization, many will look to the leaders for guidance, strength, and direction. How leaders manage crisis serves to create additional norms, perceptions, and processes, as the heightened emotions can create a deeper, richer learning environment (Schein, 2004). The allocation of resources, Schein's (2004) third embedding mechanism, can be extremely divisive, as members vie for limited resources. Weaver (2012) contends that the allocation of resources has a correlation to power. This is also a very telling mechanism, as it also demonstrates what or who is important to the leader. The fourth embedding mechanism is 'deliberate' role modeling, teaching, and coaching. Organizational leaders 'walk the walk' they want their employees to exhibit, which can be viewed as the leader creating their own 'mini-me's'. These acts or relationships can be formal or informal depending on the leader's style, approach, and goals (Weaver, 2012).

The fifth of Schein's (2004) embedding mechanisms is how leaders allocate rewards and status, and in this regard, organizational members learn about the desires of the organization through experience with promotions, performance appraisals, or other rewards. It is in this element that leaders are able to illustrate their preferences, values, beliefs, and assumptions (Schein, 2004). In the creation of organizational culture, leaders also assert a great deal of influence on who is considered 'in' and who is considered 'out', and tend to attract other members who share similar values, beliefs, and assumptions. This phenomenon leads to the leaders' influence on recruitment, selection, promotion, and dismissal. How leaders recruit, select, promote, and dismiss is the last embedding mechanism, and is what Schein (2004) argues is "one of the most subtle yet most potent ways in which leaders' assumptions get embedded and perpetuated" (p. 261).

Acker (2006) contends that organizational members envision an image of the appropriate potential employee, and often that image is of a White male. Hiring occurs in organizations through a multitude of methods, one of which is the use of social networks. Often, the use of this strategy results in the perpetuation of racial or gendered inequities, when those with the power and authority hire others who are more like themselves (Acker 2006; Marshall, 1993; Ott, 1989; Schein 2004). Acker (2006) argues that "gender and race as a basis for hiring or a basis for exclusion have not been eliminated in many organizations, as continuing patterns of segregation attest" (p. 450). This mechanism can be the most impactful because it has the potential to pervasively influence all areas of the organization, while operating at the unconscious level.

Schein's (2004) characterization of the tools (embedding mechanisms) that leaders have at their disposal illustrates the dramatic and powerful manner in which

leaders impact organizational culture. Leaders have at their disposal an array of tools that fortify their perceptions, values, feelings, and assumptions, which for better or worse, inform the experiences of all employees in an organization.

Culture exerts a powerful influence throughout the developmental stages of an organization, from its beginning into its full maturity (Locke, 2005). Although the relationship between professional development, and more specifically leadership development and organizational culture has been explored, few studies have examined the perceptions of that relationship through the experiences of African American women employed in the federal government.

Schein (2004), in articulating how culture impacts individuals within organizations, argues that

> If a group is to function and develop, one of the most important areas for clear consensus is the perception of who is in the new group and who is out (or not in), and the criteria by which inclusionary decisions are made. New members cannot really function and concentrate on their primary task if they are insecure about their membership, and the group cannot really maintain a good sense of itself if it does not have a way of defining itself and its boundaries. (p. 116)

Chapter Summary

Navigating organizational structures in the context of professional development for groups contending with the convergence of race and gender is challenging, for the groups as well as the organization. Examining and seeking a greater understanding of that dynamic for African American women is key to better management of human and capital resources and creates a framework for better management of conflict that derives from

that dynamic. This chapter presented an examination of the existing literature regarding the professional development of African American women in the federal workforce. It also provided a theoretical background and historical perspective on key concepts germane to African American women functioning in organizations. The following chapter provides an explanation of the methodology and procedures used to explore this research topic.

Chapter 3: Methodology

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the perceptions and lived experiences of federally employed African American women related to professional development. This study aimed to answer the following questions: a) What are the professional development experiences of African American women working in the federal government? b) What, if any, challenges to professional development have been experienced by this population, and what meaning do they find in those experiences? And c) What are the perceptions of this population regarding how social-organizational constructs inform their professional development? The intention of the researcher was to provide a medium for the participants to give voice to their individual and collective experiences, providing information and data that add to the existing limited body of knowledge and discourse.

This chapter offers a justification for the use of a qualitative research approach to achieve the research objectives. This chapter also offers background and a philosophy for the chosen method and contains the following major sections: research design, sample selection process, materials and instruments used, data collection procedures, interview protocol, and data analysis, followed by a chapter summary and prelude to chapter four.

Research Method and Design Appropriateness

This study was designed to examine how federally employed African American women perceive (and make meaning of) the intersection of race and gender through their lived experiences of professional development. Since there is a scarcity of available literature that examines the lived experiences of African American women in the workforce, there is a need to better understand those experiences from that population's

perspective. The nature of the problem and the research questions help determine the chosen methodology (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). As this study seeks to explore the lived experiences of a select group, a qualitative method which offers a deep richness of data is in order (Marshall & Rossman, 2011).

Not unlike a quantitative methodology, a qualitative approach is used to explore issues or problems; however, a qualitative methodology is more appropriate when the purpose is to bring to the forefront, voices that have been silenced through oppression, marginalization, and discrimination (Creswell, 2013). Qualitative research is used when the study involves complex issues that require a deep, detailed, and comprehensive understanding of the issues, as well as perceived impact of those issues on the group. Creswell (2013) argues that the only method to obtain that detailed information is by speaking directly with members of the specified group, meeting with them in their homes or jobs, and providing them the opportunity to share their narrative unfettered by the researcher's or society's expectations. In describing qualitative studies, Creswell (2013) argues,

> [T]hey [qualitative studies] can give voice to underrepresented groups, probe a deep understanding of a central phenomenon, and lead to specific outcomes such as stories, the essence of a phenomenon, the generation of theory, the cultural life of a group, and an in-depth analysis of a case. (p. 131)

In contrast, quantitative methodologies pursue clarification of a "true and correct way to look at the world," and do not allow for the incorporation of narratives provided by the participants themselves, through their words and their vernacular (Willis, 2007, p. 9).

There are a host of qualitative methodologies available to researchers, depending upon the goal and focus of the research, and Creswell (2013) suggests that researchers begin with the outcome. Since the goal of this study was to explore the lived experience of a particular phenomenon—the professional development of federally employed African American women—a phenomenological approach was most appropriate.

Creswell (2013) describes phenomenology as a research method that helps to describe a group's common meaning of their lived experiences of a phenomenon, with a purpose of reduction to a universal essence. Marshall and Rossman (2011) define phenomenology as an approach that explores, describes, and analyzes how an individual or group makes meaning from lived experiences. In his description of phenomenology, Moustakas (1994) contends that "The understanding of meaningful concrete relations implicit in the original description of experience in the context of a particular situation is the primary target of phenomenological knowledge" (p. 14). Willis (2007) conceptualizes phenomenology in opposition to traditions that attempt to learn what 'really is' relative to the world, and instead describes phenomenology as a study of how people perceive the world. Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009) describe phenomenology simply as the study of experience.

Wilhelm Dilthey, considered one of the pioneers of social science, was a German historian and philosopher who rejected the empiricist approach to social science, and introduced *Verstehen* which is an understanding of what is studied, as a fundamental alternate approach and goal of research (Willis, 2007). Phenomenology was one of the traditions that followed that approach, and was founded by Edmund Husserl, and further

expanded on by Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Sartre (Creswell 2013; Smith et al., 2009).

Phenomenology can be described as a tradition that incorporates various theoretical perspectives and models; it is not a singular approach with an established standard methodology. For instance, Moustakas (1994) embraced a transcendental phenomenological approach, Smith et al. (2009) adopted the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) model, and Pollio, Henley, and Thompson (1997) outlined an existential model.

Regardless of the orientation, theorists agree that a key element in phenomenology is perception and, according to Moustakas (1994), is considered to be the primary source of knowledge. Within the phenomenological framework Stewart and Mickunas (1990) underscore four phenomenological philosophical perspectives: 1) the goal of philosophy to seek wisdom; 2) utilization of a phenomenological approach that suspends judgment and presuppositions about reality, referred to by Husserl as 'epoche'; 3) the interrelatedness of consciousness to an object being perceived, or 'intentionality of consciousness'; and 4) the researcher's discussion regarding his or her presuppositions regarding phenomenology (as cited in Creswell, 2013, pp. 77-78). In his description of phenomenology, Moustakas (1994) also contends that a vital component to phenomenology is that the researcher refrains from making assumptions or 'suppositions' regarding the phenomena and directs his or her attention from a fresh and naïve perspective.

Giorgi (1997) also offers key factors within the phenomenological framework, several of which have previously been discussed such as consciousness and

intentionality; however, he also offers precision in the meaning of 'experience' and precision in the meaning of 'phenomena'. Consciousness refers to one individual's total lived experience, what Giorgi refers to as the "medium of access to whatever is given to awareness" (1997, p. 236). It is more expeditious and prudent to take it into account at the onset of exploration, as everything that is verbalized, conceptualized, or referenced reflects a state of consciousness—as consciousness does not simply exist, but informs the meaning assigned to the entities it reflects (Giorgi, 1997). In providing a more precise meaning of the word 'experience', Giorgi argues that a distinction must be made between the experience of tangible objects, and that of things that are present but may not have 'realistic' existence, but are germane to the understanding of a human phenomenon. Consequently, Giorgi also contends that there needs to be clarification on 'phenomenon', which he describes as "the presence of any given precisely as it is given or experienced" (p. 237).

The researcher employed a phenomenological approach for this study, as phenomenology offers the opportunity to glean valuable insight into the perceptions of the selected population, with the goal of accurately describing that information. A phenomenological approach allowed the researcher to obtain a deeper understanding of how federally employed African American women perceive how the intersection of race and gender informs their professional development, and the meaning they derive from it. This approach compliments the intersectionality framework found in Black feminist thought as it speaks to knowledge construction for African American women, as the convergence of race and gender creates a unique social location for them, which informs how they perceive reality and construct meaning of that reality. Furthermore, a

phenomenological approach provides an opportunity to better understand how federally employed African American women perceive and derive meaning from organizational social constructs that influence their intersecting identities.

Specifically, this study drew upon the phenomenological model offered by Pollio et al. (1997), which offers an existential phenomenological approach. This model is guided by five main stages of the research process: self as focus, participant as focus, text as focus, participant as focus, and research community as focus (Pollio et al., 1997, p. 60). During the first stage of self as focus, the researcher selects the topic and conducts a 'bracketing' interview. The second stage, when the participants are the focus, is when the participants are selected and are interviewed. In the third stage, with text as the focus, the interviews are transcribed and analysis occurs. The participant is again the focus in the fourth stage, as the researcher shares the analysis and findings with them, which serves as a validation tool. In the last stage, the researcher prepares the final report which places the focus on to the research community.

Bracketing

Bracketing is also referred to as *epoche* which is a Greek word that means to abstain from judgment and presuppositions, but to perceive things new (Moustakas, 1994). The concept was first introduced by Husserl, who thought it necessary for the researcher to set aside their experiences so as to take a fresh look at the phenomena, as for the first time (Creswell, 2013). During the bracketing process, the researcher works to set aside prejudgments, biases, and preconceived ideas so that no position is taken regarding the phenomena, serving to have it presented 'fresh' during the research process. Pollio et al. (1997) characterize bracketing as a 'subtractive' process in which biases and

distortions are removed to maintain the purity of the phenomena as it is presented. Moustakas (1994) posits that,

> [T]he Epoche gives us an original vantage point, a clearing of mind, space and time, a holding in abeyance of whatever colors the experience or directs us, anything whatever that has been put into our minds by science or society, or government, or other people, especially one's parents, teachers, and authorities, but also one's friends and enemies. (1997, p. 86)

Some scholars argue that 'complete bracketing' or 'epoche' is not possible to achieve; however, others argue that the goal of bracketing should not be to attain neutrality, but rather to simply reduce the influence of biases, preconceived ideas, and presuppositions (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994; Smith et al., 2009). This concept or expectation is more succinctly explained by Pollio et al. in the following statement:

> [T]he intention is not to have the interviewers become objective – only to have them become more attuned to their presuppositions about the nature and meaning of the present phenomenon and thereby sensitize them to any potential demands they may impose on their co-participants either during the interview or in its subsequent interpretation. (p. 49)

In following Moustakas' (1994) recommendation that 'epoche' or bracketing within a phenomenological framework should occur first, the researcher employed the bracketing process prior to engaging in interviews with the participants. The researcher's bracketing process took the form of a personal statement, in which the researcher explored her reasons for conducting the research, as well as her historical perspective of the topic and current concerns (Pollio et al., 1997). Through the personal statement, the

researcher explored and expressed her thoughts and perceptions of growing up as an African American female and the possible impact of those experiences. One memory that surfaced was a conversation in high school with a guidance counselor, who told the researcher that she *was not college material*. The researcher realized that it was this incident—and several others similar to it—that served as her motivation for academic and professional excellence. Through the bracketing statement, the researcher was able to revisit her experiences, with the express purpose of becoming more aware, and as much as possible, pushing them to the side. Although the researcher does not believe that it is possible to completely 'bracket out' individual experiences and biases, it is believed that bracketing is helpful in a reflective, introspective manner, which resulted in the emergence of previously subconscious views, bringing awareness, and which hopefully assisted in maintaining participant experiential focus. Marshall and Rossman (2011) contend that researchers may create a comprehensive description regarding his or her experiences with the phenomenon, with the goal of 'bracketing out' those experiences from those of the participants, providing an awareness or clarity to the researcher of preconceived ideas.

Sample

A major requirement for a phenomenological study is that all of the participants have experienced the phenomenon in question, which for this study required the participants to be employees in the federal government, be African American females, and be in pursuit of professional development. Purposive sampling is based on the premise that the researcher selects participants based on their ability to "purposefully inform the understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon in the study"

(Creswell, 2013, p. 156). Purposeful sampling requires three considerations: 1) whom to select as participants, 2) type of sampling strategy, and 3) size of the sample (Creswell, 2013, p. 155).

The researcher worked through professional contacts within the federal government to identify a purposeful sample of potential participants who met the following criteria: currently employed in the federal government, in the grades of GS-13 through GS-15, self-described African American/Black, be female, and have worked in the federal government for at least 10 years. The above criteria were chosen to ensure the participants experienced the phenomenon under study and could accurately describe it. The researcher chose the grade range of GS-13 through GS-15, as a review of the literature revealed that African American women are well represented in the grades below that range and are making great strides in the higher executive range, but hold less number of positions in the chosen grade range. Employment in the federal government for at least 10 years was a criterion for the researcher, as that would be an ample amount of time for the participants to have a breadth of experience in professional development. Additionally, the criterion of ten years allowed for the consideration of the possible influence of two different presidential administrations and the impact of those political agendas on the organizational culture.

The researcher utilized known contacts within the federal government and employed a snowball sampling strategy to identify additional potential participants. Creswell (2013) notes that snowball sampling helps to identify participants through known contacts, who know of others that have experience with the phenomenon and can

provide rich data. For this study, the researcher used the terms agency and department synonymously, as organizations use different titles.

The sample size of a phenomenological research study can vary widely. While Creswell (2013) provides a range from one to 325, Dukes (as cited in Creswell, 2013) gives a range of three to 10. Pollio et al. (1997) contend that the identification of thematic patterns in a phenomenological study is realized within three to five interviews. In her phenomenological research study, Wilkerson (2008) chose to explore the lived experiences of 20 African American females in their journey to the senior executive service in the federal government. Solomon (2013) conducted interviews with participants in her qualitative study that examined the advancement of African Americans in the federal government. Davis (2012) performed eight interviews with African American women in business and academia in an effort to explore the intersection of race and gender through their lived experiences. For this phenomenological study, twelve participants were selected from the various agencies across the United States federal government.

Instrumentation

The instrument developed for use for this study (see Appendix B) was an interview questionnaire consisting of four demographic questions and 15 open-ended questions. The demographic questions provided background information on each of the participants, while the open-ended questions were designed to illuminate the perceptions (through rich descriptions) of African American women working in the federal government regarding whether and how they perceive that race and gender inform their professional development. Creswell (2013) posits that the researcher should, "Decide on

the research questions that will be answered by interviews. These questions are open-ended, general, and focused on understanding your central phenomenon in the study" (p. 163). In line with Pollio et al. (1997), the researcher avoided 'why' questions, as they may illicit defensiveness or cause the participant to be less descriptive and more abstract. The intent of the researcher's questions was to elicit rich descriptions of the participants' experiences, and did not seek to prove or confirm a theory (Pollio et al., 1997). The interview began with demographic questions that helped to set the stage and tone of the interview, providing the participant with time to familiarize herself with the interview process. Additionally, this time continued the rapport-building process from prior contact with the participants. The semi-structured interview questions began with a request that explored the experience of professional development for the selected population. In addition to the protocol questions, the researcher used follow-up questions as needed.

Data Collection

For this study the data collection method used was in-depth phenomenological interviews with the selected participants, which provided rich data regarding their perceived experiences with the phenomenon. Marshall and Rossman (2011) argue that,

Phenomenological interviewing is a specific type of in-depth interviewing grounded in the philosophical tradition of phenomenology, which is the study of lived experiences and the ways we understand those experiences to develop a worldview. It rests on the assumption that there is a structure and essence to shared experiences that can be narrated. The purpose of this type of interviewing is to describe the meaning of a concept or phenomenon that several individuals share. (p. 148)

To ensure the protection of human subjects through respect for persons, beneficence, and justice, and to ensure the study's authenticity and validity, the researcher petitioned and sought approval from the Nova Southeastern University Institutional Review Board (IRB) prior to beginning the data collection process (Creswell 2013). The participants in the researcher's study were not part of a high-risk group, but the researcher used the IRB process to ensure they were treated with fairness, respect, and dignity. The researcher provided the participants with a comprehensive overview of the study, as well as an informed consent document (see Appendix A) that outlined the purpose, procedures, time commitments, risks and benefits of the study, confidentiality and privacy, voluntariness, and other salient information.

The researcher contacted the participants to schedule the interviews for a date, time, and location convenient to and comfortable for the participants, and which provided privacy, safety, and security, such as the participant's homes, a library, or a meeting room reserved in a federal office building in Washington, D.C. However, each of the participants chose to have the interviews conducted telephonically, as that was more suited to their schedules. The researcher estimated that the interviews would range in length between 60 to 120 minutes, but provided the opportunity for continuation sessions if needed.

The interviews were recorded using a digital device, and the researcher ensured there was a 'back-up' recording device for unforeseen eventualities, as well as extra batteries. To ensure the privacy and security of the participants' information, the researcher labeled all tapes by date, and pseudonym, and ensured they were located in a secure location until the information could be transferred onto a laptop computer (only

accessed by the researcher), as well as an external hard-drive (for back-up purposes in case of damage). Once the transfer was complete and verified, and the study was approved, the tapes were erased. The laptop computer and external hard-drive were stored in a safe and private office, to which only the researcher has access. The interviews were subsequently transcribed into written form and safeguarded and maintained in the same manner as the recorded data. Each participant was provided a copy of her transcript, which helped to ensure the accuracy and validity of the data. All participant data and data-storing devices were maintained (when not in use by the researcher) in a locked cabinet, inside of a secure room, in which only the researcher has access. Each of the interviews was meticulously transcribed from the recording device, which began the data analysis process.

Data Analysis

Immersion in the data was the first step of the data analysis process, once the interviews were transcribed. Creswell (2013) suggests that qualitative data analysis "consists of preparing and organizing the data…then reducing the data into themes through a process of coding and condensing the codes" (p. 180.) In this stage of the process, the researcher listened to the recorded interviews several times, familiarizing herself with the information. Additionally, the researcher read through the transcripts multiple times. The purpose behind the repetition of listening to the tapes and reading the transcripts was to become thoroughly and intimately familiar with the data (Marshall & Rossman, 2011).

The next step involved the researcher returning to the data to outline what Pollio et al. (1997) refer to as 'meaning units', and Moustakas (1994) refers to as 'horizons',

which are words, phrases, and statements that capture the sentiment of how the participants described their perceptions of the intersection of race and gender in regards to their professional development. During this stage, the researcher carefully and methodically read through each transcript (also referred to as a protocol), and using the highlighting feature in Microsoft Word, captured every expression germane to the experience, and used the 'new comment feature' to note the researcher's comments. Moustakas (1994) refers to this step as horizonalization. The researcher continued this activity for all protocols until all meaning units were captured.

The next stage of the phenomenological data analysis process was phenomenological reduction, which is where the researcher clusters meaning units into themes. This process occurs through the use of what Pollio et al. (1997) refer to as the 'hermeneutic circle'. The hermeneutic circle requires that the researcher consider or relate meaning units from one segment of the text, to other portions, as well as to the whole (entire protocol as well as all other protocols in the study). Continuing the phenomenological reduction, the researcher copied and pasted the highlighted words, phrases, and statements from each protocol into a new document. This listing of meaning units, or horizons, was reviewed to perceive emergent themes, which were reflected by the comment feature in the document. The researcher then classified (or clustered) all meaning units under the developed themes, and employed the hermeneutic circle by returning to the protocol to relate to the whole. The researcher continued this process until all meaning units were categorized under a theme. Pollio et al. refer to this stage as clustering thematic meaning.

The third step of phenomenological data analysis involves developing a thematic structure, which describes and reveals experiential patterns and interconnectedness within the themes. In describing thematic structure, Pollio et al. (1997) posit that,

Such meaning is not expressed in theoretical terms but is rendered in the words of the protocol itself. Although the theme is tied to the protocol, its task is to make the meaning of the protocol clear as to the way (or ways) in which the events described in the protocol were experienced and lived by the person…Thematic interpretation is a continuous process of going back and forth among various parts of the text in which earlier and later parts are continuously being rethematized in the light of new relations provided by an unfolding descriptive understanding of the text. (p. 52)

Developing thematic structure was accomplished by the researcher by immersion in each of the protocols in consideration of the established themes in an effort to develop an overarching thematic structure. Pollio et al. (1997) contend that thematic structure should have "plausibility" and "illumination" (pp. 54-55). The thematic structure should capture the participants' (federally employed African American women) perceptions of their experiences with professional development and the intersection of race and gender, and the meaning they attach to them.

In the final stage Pollio et al.'s (1997) model incorporates a group interpretation of the protocols. However, in this study, the researcher wrote analytic memos (in lieu of the group interpretations), which occurred throughout the analysis process, providing the opportunity to incorporate "thoughts about how the data [were] coming together in clusters or patterns or themes" (Marshall & Rossman, 2011, p. 213). Annotating insights,

observations, and questions during all phases of the research study provided 'memory joggers' that helped retain information that may be lost if left towards the end of the study. The final step in the process was the identification of the essence of the experience, as relayed through the discussions with the participants.

Writing the Report and Presentation of Findings

The researcher was immersed in the data throughout, thus writing the report involved a process of capturing segments of data and developing preliminary categories that developed throughout the process. The researcher incorporated all aspects of the data, exercising the hermeneutic circle and validating the report through the participants own words. Marshall and Rossman (2011) argue that "Many aspects of data analysis processes are intertwined with managing the research process…and lead logically to the final product" (p. 222).

Validity and Reliability

That final product, as Marshall and Rossman (2011) argue, must also give due consideration to "soundness, usefulness, and ethical conduct of the qualitative research study" (p. 222). Validity and reliability captures the essence of those concepts. Researchers, qualitative and quantitative alike, are expected to produce studies that are credible, of high quality, valid, and reliable. Creswell (2013) defines validity as an attempt in qualitative research to determine the accuracy of the findings, and reliability as the stability of responses. To demonstrate the validity and reliability of this study, the researcher employed a variety of techniques. The researcher shared with each of the participants, a copy of her transcript for the opportunity to check for accuracy, to provide edits, or give clarity of information. This is referred to as 'member checking,' which

Creswell (2013) argued, "involves taking data, analysis, interpretations, and conclusions back to the participants so that they can judge the accuracy and credibility of the account" (p. 252). This process served as one aspect of the validation strategy employed by the researcher. All 12 of the participants reviewed and approved their respective transcript, with only three requesting edits.

An audit trail is another method used to enhance research credibility and validity, and "account for all data and for all design decisions" (Marshall & Rossman, 2011, p. 221). The researcher maintained an audit trail as a transparent account of all data collection and management throughout the research process. One of the most important strategies employed was the use of rich descriptions provided in the words of the participants themselves. Finally, a bracketing process, or what Creswell calls "[c]larifying researcher bias," is another strategy used to increase a study's validity (p. 251). As mentioned previously, the researcher conducted a bracketing statement to surface or clarify experiences or biases that may influence the interpretation of the study. The next section also discusses bracketing from a reflexive standpoint.

Ethics and Reflexivity

Throughout the research study, the researcher must maintain a sensitivity to ethical issues or concerns that may arise, and should be prepared to manage them in all phases of the study. In addition to the various countermeasures previously discussed, such as collaboration with the IRB, use of pseudonyms, safeguarding of data, informed consent, and member checking for transcribed data, the researcher also exercised transparency and authenticity with the participants. These strategies were employed to ensure the participants were fully informed and the process was sensitive to their needs

throughout the study. Smith et al. (2012) contend that "While it is certainly important to meet the ethical 'start-up criteria' of professional bodies such as the BPS, and to pass the scrutiny of institutional ethics committees, qualitative research also requires sustained reflection and review" (p. 53).

The researcher maintained a reflexive stance to heighten her awareness of the biases, experiences, values, and prejudgments she brought to the study. She helped minimize the impacts of those factors through a bracketing exercise, as previously discussed.

Chapter Summary

Chapter three discusses the qualitative research methodology, as well as an explanation and justification for the chosen tradition: phenomenology. In chapter three, the researcher also incorporated information describing the major components of a phenomenological study, such as data collection and analysis. The researcher also addressed other areas such as reliability, validity, ethics, and reflexivity. The following chapter presents the study's findings.

Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the lived experiences of a group of federally employed African American women and their perceptions of whether and how race and gender influenced their professional development. The researcher also sought to understand how African American women in the federal workforce made meaning out of their professional development experiences. This chapter presents the results of the study, which include: a brief description of the participants (participant profiles) and a discussion of the emerging themes, culminating in the final results.

Participants' Profiles

Privacy and confidentiality are cornerstones of studies delving into potentially sensitive issues, and researchers can attend to these cornerstones by assigning the participants numbers or aliases (Creswell, 2013). Although the researcher provided each participant with a participant number as a means of identification, pseudonyms were used as an added measure of participant privacy. The pseudonyms used were randomly chosen common names found in the United States, and held no significant value or importance to the researcher or participants.

This existential phenomenological study included 12 participants who were individually interviewed using a semi-structured interview process. All of the participants self-identified: their race as African American, their gender as female, and status as current federal employees with 10 years or more of federal service and within the grades of GS-13 through GS-15. This section highlights their backgrounds and provides an overview of their professional careers. The participants in the study have a total of over 338 years of combined federal service and serve in seven different federal agencies. As

depicted in Table 3, five of the participants have a Master's degree (with one of the five also having a Doctor of Veterinary Medicine degree), three have a Bachelor's degree, and four having 'some college'. Although phenomenological approaches focus on the shared experiences of a phenomenon, leading to results that reflect an essence common to all participants, the researcher chose to provide a brief introduction of each individual participant. These are presented below.

Jordan. Jordan is an African American woman who works as a training specialist in the human resources field, and has a Master's of Public Administration degree. She has worked in the federal government for 15 years, all of which have been with the same agency, with three different supervisors. Jordan entered into federal service through a program called Student Temporary Employment Program (STEP). She perceives herself as young in comparison to others she has worked with; she states, *"Well, for me, in my career, in the jobs that I've been in, I've always been one of the youngest in the group or my staff."* She characterizes herself as being an introvert and *"very determined, very hardworking, very driven, and very motivated to be the best professional I can be. To be the best colleague that I can be."*

Staci. Staci is an African American woman who has worked in the federal sector for over 32 years and has worked in six different federal agencies. Based on what she saw happening to other African American women, she remembers being concerned about her career progression very early on; she recalled, *"I noticed that many African American women were retiring as a GS-4 and I just could not fathom that happening to me. I remember sitting there one day, just telling my coworker, I said, 'If I have to work for some place for 25 years, I'm retiring at least as a GS-13.' He looked at me and started*

laughing because that seemed really hilarious at the time." When she initially began her federal service, she did not envision herself remaining with the federal government, as she had plans to attend law school. Staci takes pride in obtaining her Bachelor's degree; she stated, *"[M]y mother, my daughter, my granddaughter got to see me walk across the stage."* She describes herself as being insightful, creative, strong, God-fearing, and intelligent. Staci also says, *"I am God-fearing. I'm intelligent. I am an individual. I am proud."*

Dana. Dana is an African American woman who describes herself as an *"introvert"* and states, *"If I were asked to describe myself I would use character, integrity, trustworthiness, respect…Those are intangible factors. I want those things to speak for me when I can't speak for myself."* She has worked in the federal government for 28 years and comments, *"It's kind of a career [government] that I actually chose it, so I kind of wanted to do it. I knew when I finished college where I wanted to go."* She came into the federal government through a *"management intern"* program, which was a career ladder position, taking her from a GS-5 through a GS-12; she obtained a Bachelor's degree. The position allowed her to serve in various divisions for 6-month periods, and one of the assignments (in Labor and Employee Relations) struck a chord with her, and she worked in that area for over 10 years. She ended up in her current field, Personnel Security, through a detail on which she was serving.

Tammy. Tammy is an African American woman who has been a public servant for over 33 years, and although she is currently a GS-14, she took a downgrade from a GS-15 to get to her current location. She began her chosen federal career straight out of high school. Also, not included in her 33 years working in the federal government,

Tammy served in the United States military. When asked about her formal education, she indicated, *"I attended college, but did not obtain my degree (short by 4 semester hours)."* When asked to describe herself, she stated, *"I would describe myself as, first of all, a saved person who has overcome adversity and challenges through my faith, and a person who is transparent in leadership and who's always willing to assist those that want help."*

Kelli. Kelli is an African American woman who has worked in the federal government for over 34 years, all of which she served in the same agency. Prior to her federal career, she worked in the private sector in banking and chose the federal government for better benefits and protections. Regarding formal education, she states, *"I did not finish my degree, but I had three years of college. With that, along with other training, I have been able to do my job well."* Kelli describes herself as, *"Dedicated and forward thinking. Dedicated in that I make sure that the job gets done. I make sure that I look at every detail, make sure every detail is worked out and I see that things get done to the end."* She stated that although she is in the Administrative Officer series, she has to *"understand a wide range of policies and procedures in terms of personnel practices, employee relations."*

Courtney. Courtney has been in the federal government for 18 years, all of which she served in the same agency. She is an African American woman who began her federal career as an intern, through the *"1890 Program,"* which she characterizes as a scholarship program that paid for her advanced degree with the condition that *"once I finished I only had to work two years to consider my debt to the agency paid off."* She feels that for most of her life, she knew what she wanted to do: *"I mean I'm probably one*

of the few that when I say at four I wanted to be a veterinarian, I'm speaking the truth." She has a Master's of Public Health Informatics degree, as well as a Doctor of Veterinary Medicine degree. Courtney describes herself as independent, a self-starter, open-minded and fair, and also states, *"I look at situations and not the people."*

Michelle. Michelle, an African American woman, has been with the federal government for 22 years and feels that she has *"come a long way through my federal career."* Regarding her education, she stated, *"As you know, a degree is not a requirement, so I did not complete college."* Michelle describes herself as tenacious and strong, but added, *"I don't want to boast on myself."* However, she also added that she is, *"Tenacious. I'm strong. I'm competent. I am self-assured at times. I think I'm consistent."* Michelle feels that from the beginning of her career, there were others who saw something in her that was worth developing; she stated they saw *"Perseverance. Willingness. The competency level of the way I think. Critical thinking. My writing skills."*

Rachel. Rachel is an African American woman who has worked in the federal government for 16 years, all of which she served in the same agency. She began her career as a recipient of the *"1890 Scholars Program"* which stipulated that, *"For every year that the USDA paid for my education, I had to work for them for a year."* She indicated that her participation in the program was how she was introduced to working in the federal government. She has a Master's degree, and describes herself as *"very dependable and reliable, trustworthy, very detailed oriented, ambitious…I think of myself as a very structured person…I like fulfilling the goal that is expected of me. If I promise something, I really try to deliver on it."*

Patty. Patty is an African American woman who has worked in the federal government for 27 years, serving 20 of those years on and off with the Department of Defense. She was introduced to federal service through a program in high school that she called *"Coop or Stay in School."* This program allowed her to go to school a half day and work in the federal government the second half, once grade and credit prerequisites were met. According to Patty, the government work would usually consist of clerical and clerk typist types of duties. She has completed some college, but does not have a degree. When asked to describe herself, she stated, *"I would describe myself as a 40-something Black female, professional. Professional in career maybe, not so much in actions."* She clarified by stating that although she is extremely proficient in her job, *"I can be a little rough around the edges…because I'm not good at sugarcoating."*

Lisa. Lisa, an African American woman with self-professed West Indian ethnicity, states that, *"[M]y family's from Jamaica. I'm an American. My parents are first-generation Americans, but everybody else is from the West Indies."* She has worked in the federal government for 17 years, and has been in her current agency for 10 years. She was first introduced to the federal government in college, where she was pursuing a paralegal degree. A substitute teacher told the class about various opportunities, which included the federal government. Also during that time, a past alumnus of the school, who worked for the justice department, spoke at a school seminar. Lisa has a Bachelor's degree and has completed the majority of the requirements for a Master's degree. She characterizes herself as a *"strong individual,"* and she states, *"I think I'm an educated individual. I think I'm deeply passionate…I feel deeply about inequities and inequality across the spectrum, not just for blacks."*

Anna. Anna is an African American woman who has worked in the federal government for 28 years, and who tried, unsuccessfully, to begin her federal career while traveling with her husband who was in the military. She stated, *"[M]y husband was military and we were traveling so much, I was trying to get in [to the federal government] ...so that when he moved my job could move also. But it just didn't work out that way."* She later got an internship in communications, which was a ladder position giving her a two-grade promotion about every two years. She has a Master's degree in electrical engineering. When asked to describe herself, Anna commented, *"I would say I'm a go-getter. I'm not the smartest in the group, but I am the one who will get the job done, figure it out one way or another, and make sure it's correct and do it swiftly. I think that if I owned my own company, I would hire me."*

Nicole. Nicole, an African American woman, has worked in the federal government for 21 years and has a Master's degree in psychology. She was influenced to enter federal service by her husband's military career. She stated that, *"As a military spouse, I felt the best thing for me to do and being one of few military spouses at the time with a degree, decided that one of the best ways to always try to keep a job because we traveled so much was to become a part of the federal government. No matter what duty station that he was assigned to, I was able to always get employment."* When asked to describe herself, she commented, *"Oh boy, smart, independent, generous, a team player, somewhat of a perfectionist, giving, professional."*

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Pseudonym	Years in Government	Years in Current Agency	Entered Grade	Current Grade	Time in Grade	Education Level	Job Series
Jordan	15 years	15 years	GS-3	GS-13	6 years	Masters	HR Specialist 0201 (HR)
Staci	32 years	1 ½ years	GS-2	GS-13	12 years	Bachelors	HR Specialist 0201 (LR)
Dana	28 years	3 ½ years	GS-5	GS-15	3 ½ years	Bachelors	0080 Security Administration
Tammy	33 years	3 ½ years	GS-2	GS-14	4 years	Some college	Equal Employment 0260
Kelli	34 years	34 years	GS-5	GS-14	8 years	Some college	Administrative Officer 0341
Courtney	18 years	18 years	GS-4 or 5	GS-13	8 years	DVM and Masters	Veterinary Medical Science 0701
Michelle	22 years	3 ½ years	GS-1	GS-13	3 ½ years	Some college	Administrative Officer 0341
Rachel	16 years	16 years	GS-7	GS-14	1 year	Masters	Biological Sciences 0401
Patty	27 years	3 years	GS-1	GS-15	3 years	Some college	Equal Employment 0260
Lisa	17 years	10 years	GS-7	GS-14	10 years	Bachelors	HR Specialist 0201 (LR)
Anna	28 years	24 years	GS-2/3	GS-15	13 years	Masters	Electrical Engineer 0855
Nicole	21 years	9 months	GS-5	GS-13	5 years	Masters	HR Specialist 0201

The findings of this study suggest that the participants' perceptions of professional development, as it relates to the convergence of race and gender, are experienced as a need to transcend thresholds. They expressed a perceived organizational requirement for them to go above and beyond in many aspects of their professional lives. Additionally, they conveyed the need to maintain a constant state of vigilance in their attempt to combat stereotypes, challenges, and barriers. The essence of transcending thresholds was reflected in the seven emergent themes and demonstrates that pursuing professional development for this population entails 'going above and beyond' in a host of arenas, as well as the use of personal motivations or influences as encouragement for doing so. The review and analysis of the information provided by the participants revealed the following seven primary themes: 1) twice the fight, 2) contending with challenges/barriers, 3) understanding self and self-efficacy, 4) professional development investors (PDIs), 5) impact of education, 6) motivational factors and influences, and 7) collective responsibility (see Figure 1). In addition to the primary themes, there were a host of sub-themes, which will be discussed below. From this activity, the researcher progressed to developing thematic structure. Thematic structure resulted from the descriptions and representations provided by the participants, which illuminated an 'interrelationship' and 'connectedness' of the emerging themes.

Theme 1
Twice the Fight
•**Traversing Stereotypes**
•**Encountering 'Isms' or Unconscious Bias**

Theme 2
Contending with Challenges/Barriers
•**Negotiating Identity**
•**Fighting for Career Development**
•**Managing Work/Life Balance**

Theme 3
Understanding Self and Self-Efficacy

Theme 4
Professional Development Investors (PDIs)
• **Support**
• **Networks**
• **Mentors**
• **Visibility**

Theme 5
Impact of Education

Theme 6
Motivational Factors or Influences

Theme 7
Collective Responsibility
•**Burden of Proof**
•**Amplifying the Legacy**
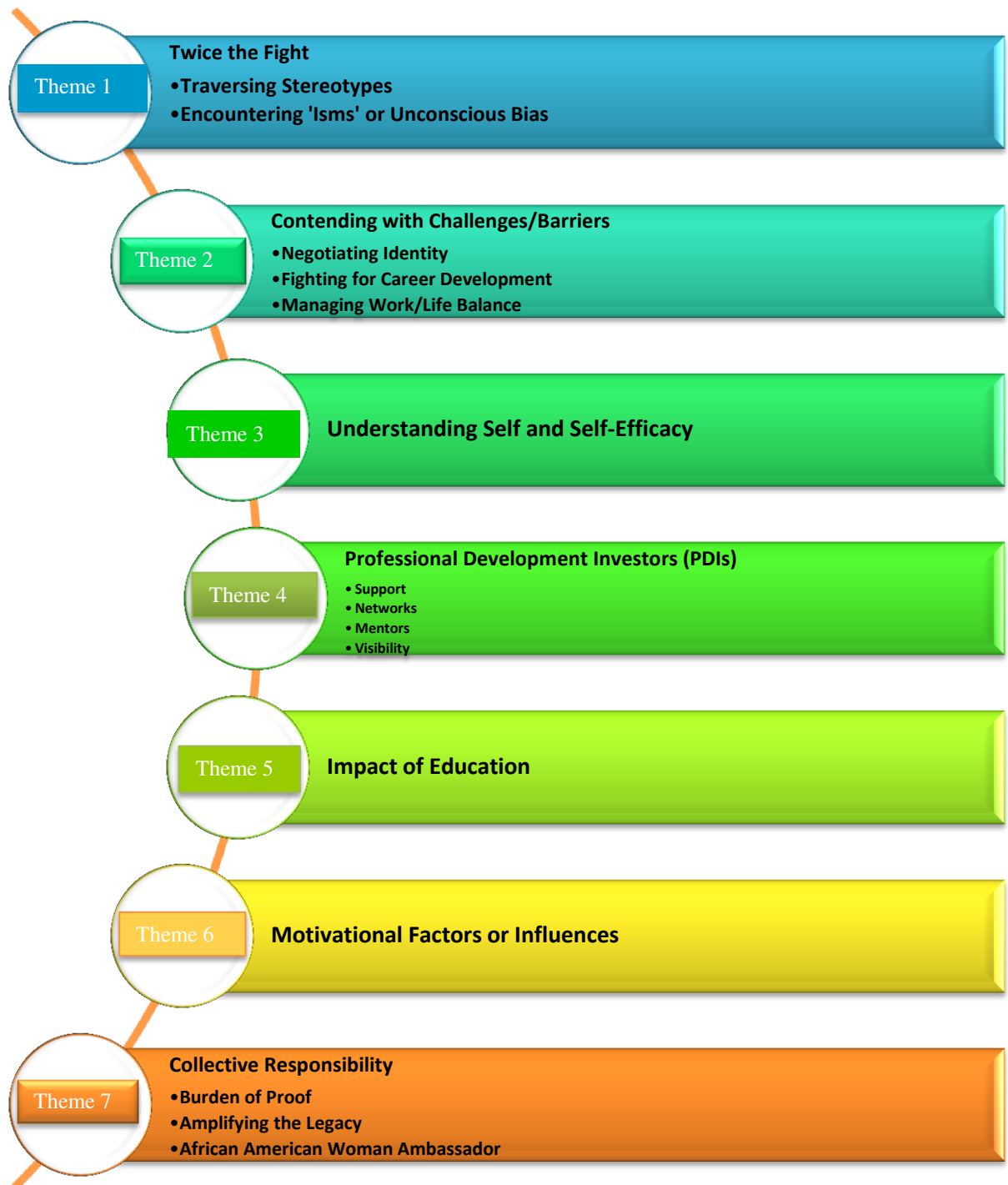•**African American Woman Ambassador**

Figure 1. Emergent themes.

The goal of this research was to gain an understanding of the work/life as experienced by the individual participants and compose a description of their experiences with regard to their race, gender, and professional development. As a result of the analysis of the information presented by the participants, the following themes and sub-themes emerged, relevant to the lived experiences of this sample of federally employed African American women.

Theme 1 – Twice the Fight

One of the themes emphasized by the women in this study was the feeling of 'twice the fight,' a term provided by one of the participants, which captured their sentiment of contending with their membership in two historically marginalized social constructs. Many of the participants described experiences that, to them, meant that the two social constructs of race and gender were never separate, but the combination of the two created a 'different' identity than the 'sum' of the two separate parts.

In relation to race and gender, when asked how she most identified, Nicole stated that she identified with both equally; she explained:

> *"I come from very, very, very humble beginnings with a single parent and a very segregated area. I was always, always identified as a black person, a black individual. When I went to college, I went to a predominantly white college. I became very, very aware then as well, reminded of course of my blackness as well. That's always been a huge part of my identity. Upon entering the workforce, I started to notice the differences between male and female in the workforce, how things do appear to be more advantageous for men versus women. That identity as a female became prominent as well. Of course, I married. I had my children.*

That became reinforced, me being a woman and what that means, and also what that means as an African American woman and how I operated as a mother and as a wife, all of those things just always served as reminders that I was definitely black and that I was definitely a woman. I do identify myself equally as both."

Lisa stated:

"I don't know how to separate them because it is what I am. To me, it doesn't seem as an intersection. Honestly, I don't know that I see an intersection because I am what I am. When I go to a meeting and it's all males, I think they see me as both and I think both together, individually or collectively, are problematic. As a woman, I see things differently than men. As a black female, I mean as a black person, I also see things differently."

Patty explained:

"The combination because I realize that I am both and that's who I am and that's what people see when they look at me... When they see me, it's not, 'Oh, this is a female,' or 'This is a black person.' It's 'This is a black female,' which sometimes is a double whammy because not only are you minority but you are also a female minority, so you have twice the fight."

When Tammy was asked about how she identified, she also embraced her identity as a combination of her race and gender, never considering one without the other. She stated,

"It's the combination... I grew up in that era where because of the color of your skin, the dark complexion of my skin, even the lighter complected African Americans...We used to call it down in the South, they were color struck...I've had a lot of times where I've had to really, really pray, stay strong in the word

because my journey has been one that not only have I faced obstacles from those outside of the black race, but also within the black race, particularly black females, those that I have supervised."

Staci shared:

"I think that in many regards it's a packaged deal. It's not one without the other. Together, it means something different than singular."

When the researcher asked Anna about her identification with race and gender, she appeared to equivocate between the two. Initially she indicated that she identified more with being African American; however, as she recalled past experiences, she stated that she identified more with being a female. However, upon further reflection, she stated that it was possibly both; her excerpt follows:

"African American…Well, first of all there's not a lot of black females in my field. I've met someone. When I first started I was a communications specialist and when I was training sometimes there was none. No black females in the class at all. You know what times have changed when it comes to being a female and being black, both...So I think that I'm going to say the impact would be being a female in the field, more so than being a black, because there are some highly respected black males in this field and I don't know any highly respected women. Well, a few white women in this field, no black women though. I guess I would say being a female would be where the impact would be. Being both, it's a really hard question because it just depends where you are in the country. I do know that being both you definitely have to keep your eyes wide open and make sure you are on your toes all the time."

Rachel stated:

> *"I feel like, as a woman, people automatically assume that we are that way…I feel*
>
> *like, just day to day operating, I have to be very professional and not let my*
>
> *activities be led by emotion… I feel like I always have to be on my P's and Q's… I*
>
> *feel like I have to be more prepared a little bit…You have to make sure that you*
>
> *are measuring up and fighting against stereotypes of African Americans and*
>
> *stereotypes of women."*

Although the researcher chose to use the term 'double the fight,' it must be mentioned that not all of the participants held this same perception. Within the study, there were several participants (outliers) who identified more with either race or gender. For instance, Jordan declared,

> *"I would say with being female. With me, I really don't see color. I identify more*
>
> *with being female… Race and gender and how it impacts me? For me, I think,*
>
> *again, I'm one of those people; I don't see color. I don't think that me being an*
>
> *African American woman had an impact on me moving up in the ranks. I think, if*
>
> *anything, a lot of times, being a woman in a heavily-populated male environment,*
>
> *I think that has impacted me in some way."*

Jordan, unlike the other participants, did not perceive color. The other participants recognized their differences as both a female and African American, which to them, required double attentiveness, double-situational awareness, and double the struggle.

Traversing Stereotypes. A major sub-theme that surfaced during the interviews was stereotypes, identified by eight of the 12 participants. The participants described various events involving what they perceived as 'stereotyping' from others in the

workplace. When discussing their experiences with stereotypes, the participants used words and phrases such as: aggressive, emotional, too strong, having to 'bogard' through, strong-willed, and domineering. Three of those who mentioned stereotypes also shared the difficulties they experienced, and how it impacted the navigation of their organizational systems.

When discussing perceived stereotypes involving race and gender, Nicole provided her perception of how African American women were perceived in her organization; she stated:

"African American women, for the most part, were used to get it done, to get it done, and to get it done right. We were extremely hard workers. We were dependable. We were committed to doing a good job and could be counted to meet deadlines and get it done. We were used in those ways, but was never given credit on a public platform for the work that was being done."

Anna shared a situation at work that she believed demonstrated how an 'outsider' questioned her creditability, possibly based on her race and gender; she recalled:

"I guess negatively a few things that have happened through my career. It didn't impact my career, but I had a very large project redesigning the network infrastructure and I had to bring in some folks from Verizon. And whoever Verizon contracted at the time, it wasn't a Verizon employee. It was a subcontractor. They were asking whether I knew what I was doing or not, so I would always have to reprove myself. I don't think if I was a white male I would have told them what my credentials were or how I was qualified to tell them what to do or anything. It was my project, my money, and these were contractors. That

was a negative impact, which I'm a girl. I'm a '70s child, so I expected that and I
was used to. I fired the guy and told them to bring in somebody else because I
don't feel like once I went through all that I didn't need to prove myself to
anybody except for my employer."

Additionally, in her interview, Patty began to discuss what she perceives to impact the African American community, and one of the prevalent areas she mentioned regards images of African American women in the media:

"The television shows us that we're just good for gold-digging and wearing
weaves and dancing in videos which we all know is quite the opposite because
they are the minority."

While the eight participants in the study addressed stereotypes generally, three referenced stereotypes specifically related to gender. Rachel shared:

"I think, as a female, in my day to day, I feel like I am respected in my job. I also
feel like I have to be very careful about how I come across or my emotions or
whatever. There are women on my staff, and not necessarily African American
women, but there are women on my staff that break down at work. They get very
emotional. I feel like, as a woman, people automatically assume that we are that
way. I feel like, just day to day operating, I have to be very professional and not
let my activities be led by emotion… You have to make sure that you are
measuring up and fighting against stereotypes of African Americans and
stereotypes of women."

When Michelle was asked which she identified more with, African American or female, she initially replied African American; however, upon further reflection, she stated:

"I think, unfortunately on the downside of being in the federal workforce as an African-American and a woman, we are perceived ... Maybe I can lean towards both African-American and women. I think we are perceived to be very aggressive when we speak, or we are strong willed, so we are looked upon a little domineering…"

When asked about her organization's view of African American women, she said simply—*"Too strong. Too strong. Too strong."*

Jordan stated:

"I think, if anything, a lot of times, being a woman in a heavily-populated male environment, I think that has impacted me in some way. Again, going back to the example, being one of the young people, that I've had to work even harder and that feels, sometimes, being a woman, especially a young woman, I have to prove myself a little bit more… In terms of how it impacts me, sometimes it can be a little stressful, a little overwhelming, when I feel like I have to go above and beyond to prove myself. Like, 'Hey, I am a woman but I can offer just as much as a male can,' or 'I can do this just like a male can do.' It can be a little overwhelming at times, when you have to, for me, especially, have to work harder than some of my male counterparts where I'm having meetings with the executives or having meetings with specific people. I have to prove myself a lot more because I am a woman in meeting or in trainings and in things like that."

Although things have since changed for Anna, she recalled, *"When I was young this career field wasn't an option, and if it was an option it wasn't an option to the black women."*

Contending with stereotypes for this group of participants meant that they needed to work *doubly hard* to disprove or dispel gendered or racialized stereotypes they experienced in the workplace. Although stereotypes are a normal part of life, the participants believed that they could have a detrimental effect if they are not challenged, and can lead to racism or sexism, which are discussed below.

Encountering 'Isms' or Unconscious Bias. The second sub-theme of *twice the fight* was *encountering isms or unconscious bias.* While only two participants used the exact terms of racism, sexism, or *'isms'* in general, all 12 participants shared common experiences that they perceived as disparate treatment, which were discussed in various ways. The participants recounted numerous instances where they or someone they knew were the only African American woman at the *leadership table.* The participants also described other people's subtle actions and behaviors, and they further shared that they were unsure as to whether or not those people were aware of those actions and behaviors, or the impact of them.

Staci explained:

"I definitely felt that race was a big issue because there were a lot of women who were in my division in position. However, I do feel that those women that were in position did not look like me. The opportunities just seemed to be limited. There just seemed to be an attitude…I'm not going to dumb down because someone is uncomfortable, rather than the person saying, 'Hey, yeah, let it rip. That's who I hired. I don't have to know all of this. That's why I hired her.' When you have that level of insecurity, where you've got those isms that are so deeply embedded that it goes beyond reason, it goes beyond benefiting the organization…I feel so

> *discriminated against and so mistreated here that I would rather go to an agency*
>
> *that is currently under furlough than to stay here."*

Lisa shared:

> *"I find that when you work in the federal government, there are a lot of -isms.*
> *There's classism, there's racism, social economic -ism, culturalism. My*
> *experience has been that I'm considered other. I don't fit in with the typical*
> *federal government worker. I'm always told that I'm more outspoken than most…*
> *I think a lot of it has to do with being black and being female. Those things are*
> *held against you, if you would. I believe they are… I'm labeled aggressive. I'm a*
> *debater by nature. I'm a researcher. I'm well-spoken. I'm educated. If I was a*
> *white man, I don't think I'd be labeled aggressive. Certainly even maybe if I was*
> *a black man. I don't know about that, because I'm not a man. I know that my race*
> *and my gender has played a part."*

When recalling a situation when Lisa had applied for a position for which she felt she was well-qualified, she stated, *"I believe my race and my gender were the reason why they didn't select me. Most of the people that I would've been giving that advice and counsel do not look like me. It's predominantly white males with a few minorities sprinkled in."* She went on to say,

> *"Even though my blackness and my womanness or femaleness may hold me back*
> *in this agency, I have no doubt that if I go somewhere else it's going to be the*
> *same thing because it's our American culture. Women are second class, blacks or*
> *whatever it is. We're not up there with the white folks and we're not running*

things. We're not in control. Even with a black president, we're not. We all know

that. We see that every day."

Nicole explained:

"From my perspective, if you weren't blue-eyed, blond-haired, white male, you

were not afforded the opportunity to get into those positions. Those were

perceived as the cream of the crop type of positons, because you are representing

HR to the program areas. You are the face. You became the face of HR so to

speak pretty much."

Dana asserted:

"You know, probably what you felt is it's so--and I've felt it as well, it's so almost

covert. In some ways I'm not even sure if people are aware that it's happening, or

if they are it's--I don't know. Because I never experienced this so much as I did

recently. When I say recently, when I was--and it's probably because I was a one-

woman black show, quite honestly. I was obviously looked at differently and held

to a much, much higher standard."

Patty shared:

"I must say that sometimes in the federal government, I have to say I get

discouraged with it because I feel like it's just lip-service because for so many

years, the change is so small and it's incremental, but I do believe that it is

change and any change is good… when you walk into your building, your office,

your agency, and all the leadership are white males, it's discouraging. I know

where I am now, they have a wall of past leaders from the beginning of our

agency because our agency is pretty young. As you walk through the hall, the

whole hall is filled with white males, mostly ex-military, and that's discouraging because you don't see yourself in that leadership… You can't see yourself in leadership because it's not there. It kind of makes you think, 'Well, what am I fighting for? What do I push for?' Because it's obvious that historically I don't have a seat at the table. This year is the first year that we've had a black male leader in the history of this agency, so yeah, that's the discouraging part."

Tammy stated:

"As I look at the federal government, particularly the higher graded positions, I find that there are very few African American females in the GS15 and higher ranks. You have a lot of African American females in the 14, but we tend to bump that glass ceiling and not be allowed to go higher… That glass ceiling I talked about is alive and well in this agency. It is a law enforcement agency made up predominately of older white men. It is very difficult for African American females to break through those ranks. When they do achieve that level of success, it is not in the law enforcement field. There are very few African American females in the senior executive service ranks in this agency. As matter of fact, you can count it on one hand and have some fingers left over. Those non-minority females that have made it into the senior executive ranks, they are in support positions, and not in law enforcement positions."

Anna recalled:

"I'm the first black and the first female...yes, I am the first female. First black and the first female branch chief for this branch and at one time I think I was the only black female branch chief in our whole organization… Actually, when I bring in

young black females sometimes I give them that as an example, because I want

them to know it doesn't matter how far you go in your education you're always

black and you're always female and there's always going to be somebody

doubting you. Now, I had thought about going downtown a few times because I

wanted to work in the DC area, and I decided not to just of that reason. With my

grade I would have to prove why I'm this grade, so I decided not to. After a while

you get tired."

The participants expressed a sense of different treatment for African American women and sometimes perceived higher standards. While the specific circumstances of their experiences differed, the impact was essentially the same—contending with racialized or gendered biases, stereotypes, or discrimination.

Theme 2 – Contending with Challenges/Barriers

The theme of contending with challenges or barriers was prevalent amongst the participants, as they recalled instances of overcoming challenges or encountering barriers. All 12 of the participants discussed having to deal with challenges or barriers; however, the impact and sources varied greatly. In addition to some of the other challenges that are inherent in dealing with stereotypes, which were previously mentioned, the following three sub-themes emerged: negotiating identity, fighting for career advancement, and managing work/life balance.

Negotiating Identity. Knowing and understanding self in relation to the organizational culture was an important factor for participants, which was a prerequisite as they attempted to negotiate their identity within their respective organizations. Identity negotiation is the process of shifting from one's true self (which incorporates the

individual's values, norms, traditions, and cultural communication styles), to present a self that is more palatable or acceptable to those in the majority group (Jackson, 2002). As African American women cannot truly assimilate into the majority culture, negotiating identity is but one strategy used to be more successful in the workplace. Of the 12 participants, eight indicated that they felt a need or were expected to negotiate their identities, to develop a better fit with established organizational values, reflecting Euro-centric unwritten codes of conduct. Some of the key words and phrases that captured the sentiment of the participants were: navigating through, adjust, adapt, stay true to who I am, telephone voice, aggressive, quiet force, choosing battles, being very professional, sugar-coating, and fitting in a mold.

Rachel stated:

"I also feel like I have to be very careful about how I come across or my emotions or whatever. There are women on my staff, and not necessarily African American women, but there are women on my staff that break down at work. They get very emotional. I feel like, as a woman, people automatically assume that we are that way. I feel like, just day to day operating, I have to be very professional and not let my activities be led by emotion."

Michelle explained:

"I think we are perceived to be very aggressive when we speak, or we are strong willed, so we are looked upon a little domineering, and we're not… It [organizational structure] has influenced me to learn how to I guess really network and be a face. It's influenced me in that aspect, and to just be a quiet force, but to try to initiate change… I think I believe in just being quiet and only

speaking when you have to… I just choose and pick my battles. But I'm strong; a

strong [quiet] force though."

When Michelle was asked how she thought her organization views African American women, her response was: *"Too strong. Too strong. Too strong."* In light of her description of herself as a 'quiet force' and her belief that her organization viewed African American women as being too strong, when questioned as to whether the two were related, she responded in the affirmative.

Courtney remarked:

"I think people are, when they don't know who I am, but they see my work or heard me speak ahead of that. They are sometimes surprised… I pick my battles, when I need to say something, when I don't. If I have to, I'm tactful, but I don't bite my tongue about my feelings on it if I see injustice or if I see something wrong… when I disagreed, I was nice about it, or tactful about how I expressed my disagreement, but I didn't hold back."

Tammy shared:

"When I first came to this organization, I actually came on a detail. One of the areas that I had to work with was our office that was located in Minnesota. Of course, all of the communications were done via telephone. My telephone voice on most days sounds non-black... I'll just put it like--The people there, because of that telephone voice, they were very forthcoming. They gave all of the information and the assistance that I could ask for and more. Jump forward a few months, we had an all hands. The director brought everyone in to attend the all hands. I was introduced and the shock on their face told me everything. Shortly thereafter, I

met with a great amount of resistance from that staff… When I exited the military and I lived in Japan, again, my telephone voice does not sound ethnic when I want. It depends on what I'm doing."

Dana stated:

"I still tried to always remain true to who I am as a person, not necessarily what you see is what you get, but yeah, what you see is what you get. I know how to adapt to various environments and things of that nature… still stay true to who I am… All of my managers were white. One of them didn't particularly like the way that I apparently talked… I've always been conscious of the fact that I can have an accent or a Southern accent, I'm always conscious of that. Because people will use it detrimentally. I think in this instance that happened. If someone doesn't like the way that you communicate, for whatever reason and I am an introvert… I think had I been a white female I would have been given the benefit of the doubt, because people have all kinds of accents…We have to know our audience and we have to be able to adapt in any given situation."

Lisa asserted:

"I'm expected to fit into some other mold I think because I'm a woman. Men don't get treated the way I'm treated when I speak… I'm impacted every day by that [double standards] because there are those that believe that I should be acting differently and being in a different place than I am, that I carry myself in a way that's not acceptable to them. That's every day."

The participants perceived an expectation, within their respective organizations, of the need to behave in a manner different from their *true selves*, and more in line with majority norms.

Fighting for Career Development. Eight out of the 12 participants in this study experienced unique challenges in their careers that were specific to their advancement or development. The eight participants admitted to experiencing difficulties in their professional development; however, they differed on the specific challenges, as well as some of their responses to those challenges. The participants cited issues such as, combating stereotypes, fighting for advantages given to others, and dealing with *isms*. Seven of the eight participants who acknowledged experiencing career development challenges, used the word 'fight' to describe that experience, with the eight participant describing a fight or struggle without using the exact word. The participants made a distinction between combatting stereotypes and *isms*, which were general struggles to simply be perceived differently and treated fairly; however, their discussions of the contentions with stereotypes, and isms as they related to career development, involved a fight or struggle for career development opportunities specifically, that may or may not involve stereotypes or isms.

Staci shared:

"It wasn't an easy ride. There was always challenges throughout… we were numbers and so forth, so I remember, the day before, it was right when I was scheduled to get my promotion to my GS-7 and I just my husband and I bought a house. I just bought a house. I remember my colleague, a white male, we were in the training class together. He whispered to me, said, 'Oh, yeah. We're getting

our promotion,' and I said, 'Okay.' When I go to the manager, not only did she tell me I was not getting my promotion, she told me I was being placed on PIP [performance improvement plan], but I still got my WIGI [within grade increase]. That was very frustrating. That was my first, and I ended up filing a grievance with the union and, as the saying in the union, it's -- justice delayed is justice denied. I was very bitter… Of course, working in Labor and Employee Relations now, I know that all of that was incorrect and the fact that they gave me a WIGI, but these were things that I was unaware of at the time… It was a struggle, making sure I got my promotions on time… I had to fight really each way up the ring. It was not … Let's just say it wasn't an easy road. There were a lot of different challenges."

Tammy stated:

"Growing up in that environment, I learned at an early age that anything that I wanted to achieve in life, I really had to fight for it… I don't want to say luck because I don't believe in luck, but it was really a lot of answered prayers and initiative on my part to follow the chosen path for me. Following God's plan allowed me to go up the ranks. And of course money played a big part. I really had to make sure that I stayed fully engaged in seeking out the career opportunities, the training opportunities and making sure that I had a good mentor… I have learned that I have a job to do. Just because someone doesn't like me, they don't like the color of my skin or my gender, will not keep me from performing the job that I have to do."

Courtney explained:

> *"Now that I have my 13, I would say I've had it for a long time. Most of the opportunities that I feel that I've had are because I pushed for them. I've had good bosses, bad bosses. I think if I were not as an independent worker as I am, that things would be differently. I'm always kind of constantly fighting, okay well I deserve this, I deserve this, I've done this, and doing lots of projects. You know, trying to prove that I'm a good employee, and I work hard, and I'm committed to the agency… I've been trying to get my 14 for years now, a couple years now. Matter of fact, right now I was recently put into accretion of duties, because I took on a team lead position for the last three years without any promotion. There were others who had the same positions in our staff, because we broke up into three teams. They all were 14s, and I was not even offered a temporary. Even if it's temporary with something, I had to fight for it, and I finally got a temporary promotion—I finally got a temporary promotion, but I had to fight for it… I think that's a little discouraging, because I really do like my work, I don't want to leave. I know that I'm going to have to soon, because I just don't think there's anything else for me in the agency, or at least in this office… No matter how many ways I look at it, I think that the only way for me to get any more development or even a higher salary, or just better work, or more visibility, is for me to leave."*

When asked to describe her overall career development experience, Nicole expressed her experience in the following manner: *"While I have worked with program areas before, when it came to working with the program areas that were scientific, that's where I would say my growth, my training growth was pretty much stunted at that time."* When

asked the follow-up question of if and how she overcame that challenge, her response was:

> *"I can't say that I have. I got to the place to where it was this is just not even worth the battle any more. I got comfortable with just doing what I do and doing it well pretty much behind the scenes. When I looked at just how bureaucratic it was after you got to the 14 and 15 grade levels, I tell you honestly for me, it pretty much became a turn-off. I just was not interested in the bureaucracy and everything that came along with going up to the higher levels. I just wasn't."*

Nicole also shared an experience of her attempt to get out of her current job series to expand her skillset; she stated:

> *"I've been desiring to get out of the 201 series for a long time, which was one of the reasons that I went back to school. I got a degree in psychology. I was hoping to be able to transition into the employee relations arena. When you've been in a series for so long, it becomes very, very difficult to be provided with an opportunity in another area unless you know someone within the federal government. And, I tried to get out of the 201 series. It just did not happen.*
>
> > *"The 201 has served me well. It's been good to me, but I've wanted to broaden my background, my skillsets. I wanted to do that by getting into another area, but I was not able to do that. What really has driven my career decisions as far as where I'm at right now is just the inability to get out of it to be completely honest."*

Although much of her professional development experience has been positive, Michelle also asserted:

"I know it's been an uphill battle but it's also been ... I can honestly say my
experience has been more positive than negative. I've had little pockets of
negativity, but it just gives grows you and it also humbles you. You always have to
take certain things with a grain of salt and then you fight and choose your
battles."

During the data analysis process, a key element amongst a group of the participants also emerged—participation in an agency 'internship' type of program. Half (six) of the participants in the study were benefactors of a pre-career developmental program, which provided them with opportunities for promotion, increased job knowledge, and experience. For this group of women, career development opportunities involved greater effort and persistence.

Managing Work/Life Balance. Of the 12 participants, four discussed circumstances surrounding their work/life balance and the choices and/or sacrifices they felt they and other women were forced to make. Jordan indicated that she chooses to remain at her current rank, as it affords her the work/life balance that she desires at this time, which indicates a perception that achieving a higher level would not provide her with that work/life balance. Jordan expressed:

"What mostly influences my career decision now is my family. I've been a 13
[grade] for 6 years and I've been getting feedback from some people: 'It's time
for you to move on,' or 'It's time for you to be looking at supervisory positions,'
but where I am in my life now, for me, it's all about making decisions for my
family, health, and wellness and things like that, and where I am is a very
supportive environment for health and wellness. Having that balance so you can

be able to spend time with your family, so that's been one thing, in terms of my

career as to why I haven't made certain moves; it's because I'm thinking about

my family. I'm thinking about my health and wellness and those things are very

important to me right now in my life."

Patty, while not specifically impacted by work/life balance concerns that involve other

family members, shared a situation about a coworker. She recalled having a conversation

with a manager who was sharing his perception on why women do not get promoted

beyond the 13 level. Patty explained:

"One of the things that a senior leader an SES told me during a briefing was that

'they don't go beyond the 13 level because they're not willing to do what it takes

to be a 14 and 15. They're too emotional. This is a career field where emotion, it

has no part. You have to have a heart, you have to be able to work long hours.'

I've also had a study group that I conducted with the, well we're GG's, we're not

GS, with the 15's, the 15 females and one of the females told me that she has put

her marriage, her family plans on hold because she has to be at work at 3 a.m.

She's supposed to get off 8 hours later, but because she has to do so much more to

prove herself, sometimes she doesn't get off until midnight and has to be back at 3

a.m. and it's taken a toll on her marriage and her husband wants to have kids and

she's like, 'It wouldn't be fair to do that now because I don't have time for

children.'... Forced to choose between your family life and your career, and it's

not always based on merit in my opinion. I think it's used to weed out people that

you don't want to have certain positions. You do have those that'll stay and fight

and fight and stay but then it takes a toll on their health, takes a toll on their

marriages, and at some point it's like, is it really worth it?"

Anna shared:

"But I guess I was just hungry for something and this was presented, but you had

to really take a risk and I had to take a chance. I took a chance and I took a risk,

because I had to move my whole family from...my husband was still in the service.

He had two more years in the military, but I moved my children, I have three

children, from Petersburg Fort Lee in Virginia to Adelphi, Maryland… My career

actually started there in Adelphi, but I had to do a lot of moving the kids around

for about a year. I had to move them around a lot, but then the way I figured it

they moved with their father for 20 years so they could move around with me for a

year. It was a choice. It was a choice to start a career, and that was a career."

Work/life balance issues were concerns these women had to navigate, while simultaneously contending with the myriad of other concerns that they felt required them to go above and beyond. They found it difficult to continue to achieve or maintain work/life balance while managing the various other issues that surface in the workplace that they perceive may be linked to their identity.

Theme 3 – Understanding Self and Self-Efficacy

Another overarching theme that surfaced in the discussions with all 12 participants was the concept of understanding the self and/or self-efficacy. For the purpose of this study, self-efficacy simply refers to an individual's belief in her capability and capacity to accomplish goals or dreams, succeed at tasks, or overcome challenges. The participants in this study had a keen awareness of who they are, what assets they

bring to their respective organizations, the importance of qualities that they may or may not possess, and where they want to go in their careers. Staci, a GS-13, recalls a conversation (very early on in her career) with a coworker, when she articulated a goal, which at the time may have seemed outlandish. Staci shared:

> *"As a GS-2, at Social Security Administration, which is where I started out in Baltimore, I looked around and I noticed the demographics. I was 20 years old and I noticed that many African-American women were retiring as a GS-4 and I just could not fathom that happening to me. I remember sitting there one day, just telling my coworker, I said, 'If I have to work for some place for 25 years, I'm retiring at least as a GS-13.' He looked at me and started laughing because that seemed really hilarious at the time…"*

Staci also recalled another event with her then supervisor, who she was in conflict with, because she felt her supervisor wanted her to compromise her integrity. Staci stated that she refused to do so and believed it cost her a promotion. When asked about it by a gentlemen she had been mentoring, she stated: *"I just told him that personally or professionally I refused to work anyplace where I'm not appreciated or valued, period, because at that point I recognized my value. I don't need someone to validate it, and so I left."* She provided the following summation of self-awareness: *"It's not overnight. When you get to that realization of who you are, the rest of the stuff, it can come and go, but once you really have a knowing of who you are and why you are here, it's easy to function."*

Dana explained:

"I try to manage my own destiny rather than someone managing it for me, so I started to apply for positions… I still tried to always remain true to who I am as a person, not necessarily what you see is what you get, but yeah, what you see is what you get. I know how to adapt to various environments and things of that nature."

When Dana's interview was concluding, she was asked if there was something else she wanted to share that would be relevant to the study, she added:

"I think this is true for anyone but particularly for black females, is that we have to know our audience. We have to have a certain amount of political savvy and business acumen, those are some of the ECQs, the Executive Core Qualifications. But it really is true, know your audience and be able to adapt as well. I think that's really very true for black females. I can only speak for black females. We have to be able to adapt. We have to know our audience and we have to be able to adapt in any given situation. I think that's true no matter what level you may be as a black female. Whether you're a manager or not I think that's true, that you have to be able to adapt and know the audience."

Tammy asserted:

"I really had to make sure that I stayed fully engaged in seeking out the career opportunities, the training opportunities and making sure that I had a good mentor… I guess I'm going to say the military, because I really identify with the military. It's straight forward. You have a target in mind and you work to achieve that target. Then you work to achieve the target above that target."

When Patty was asked to describe herself, she shared a multitude of descriptors, and although not asked, she also volunteered perceived areas of improvement. She had such a sense of self-awareness, that there was an ease and seamless flow from her strengths, directly into areas of improvement. Patty shared:

"Well, I would describe myself as a 40-something black female, professional. Professional in career, maybe not so much in actions, and the reason why I would describe myself that way is because like I said, I am a black female. I do know my profession, I am extremely proficient in what I do, but I can be a little rough around the edges as it relates to corporate America because I'm not good at sugarcoating. I'm a very straightforward person. I'm not… I don't do things to purposely hurt feelings, but I do speak the truth and if that is what is really going on and ... I'll say this, I do point out the elephant in a room. I don't just let him sit there."

Although Nicole shared a host of positive descriptors of herself and relayed examples of self-efficacy, she too had a comfort with recognizing a characteristic that she perceived may not be as positive in her professional development. Nicole explained:

"I'm not aggressive. I am not an aggressive person that bogards my way through. I'm sure this probably was a negative factor personally as well… particularly if you're African American and female. I perceive that you have to project a certain personality and also project a certain level of aggressiveness in order to bogard your way through. That's just not a part of my personality."

For this group of participants, understanding self and having an acute awareness of who they are, and their worth were deemed essential elements for African American

women pursuing professional development. They appeared to sense that although those concepts are important for most groups, as an African American woman with historic oppression and current marginalization, the stakes are even higher, requiring more vigilance.

Theme 4 – Professional Development Investors

One of the few themes shared by all of the participants concerned the various entities that played a significant role in their professional development. The researcher chose to employ the term 'professional development investors' as it captured the manifold contributors, or in some cases 'detractors' (due to the absence of investors) of the participants' experiences with career development. The participants described and characterized their individual experiences, which led to the following sub-themes: support, networks, mentoring, and visibility, which are all types of PDIs.

Support. When asked to describe their perceptions of their overall experience of professional development in the federal government, each participant made specific reference to 'support' or similar verbiage and were all able to recall and share positive experiences of support in their professional development.

Jordan recalled:

"Well, professional development for me has been great. Every time I seek out professional development opportunities and share them with my supervisor, she's always supportive of my professional development. My experience, too, with my supervisor, if she runs across anything that she feels may be of advantage of me to take advantage of, in terms of career development or professional development, she always shares those opportunities with me as well. I always feel like if I want

to improve on a certain skill or I want to look at ways to advance in my career I have full support from my supervisor."

Kelli stated:

"I think I've been very lucky in that I've had very good immediate supervisors. The senior leadership who come in as political appointees have been, for the most part, very good managers themselves, very respectful… I've just been extremely lucky in that I've had good managers, good supervisors that supported me and that understood the job that I was doing was important to ... Important to them as well, so that they would be an effective organization."

Michelle explained:

"Those who took an interest in developing me, so factors were supervisors who were engaging and who were excellent leaders and managers was the factors… As you know, a degree is not a requirement so I did not complete college. However, I was with supervisors who saw the path that I was going into and they kind of pushed me in that direction."

Rachel stated:

"I've had supervisors and managers that have really encouraged me to get training that I didn't think I was prepared for, as well as supported me in training that I really wanted. They supported my efforts in doing that…The people that I would work with in the summers, they really encouraged me to go after my advanced degrees and introduced me to different options. I would say, not only my supervisors, but my colleagues were one of the factors that encouraged me for professional development."

Lisa recalled:

> "Under [manager's name], he believed that each person serving in a
> management position should be exposed to professional development for their
> own personal development, so you always got an executive coach. It's not
> something that's asked for. Your program area or your division is not responsible
> for paying it. It just showed up, the paperwork just showed up in your ... It wasn't
> voluntary, you had to do it. That opportunity to have an executive coach helped
> me with many of the things that I faced."

Anna explained:

> "I've had a lot of formal training, informal training, hands on training, and then
> OJT. It worked out very good for me, and over the years I've had some good
> studies, some good people that I was able to work with who were more familiar
> with the field than I was."

Patty simply stated:

> "I just have had people in my past that have been very supportive and have seen
> something in me that I didn't always see in myself, but just pushed me forward."

The sub-theme of support typically connotes a positive outcome or experience, and
although all of the participants shared positive experiences, four of them were also able to
recall negative experiences.

Nicole explained:

> "I've been desiring to get out of the 201 series for a long time, which was one of
> the reasons that I went back to school. I got a degree in psychology. I was hoping
> to be able to transition into the employee relations arena. When you've been in a

series for so long, it becomes very, very difficult to be provided with an

opportunity in another area unless you know someone within the federal

government. And, I tried to get out of the 201 series. It just did not happen."

Lisa asserted:

"At my other agency, the department of education, I came in as a 7. I went

through my grade 7, 9, 11, 12. At the GS-11 grade, I moved from being a

paralegal specialist to a management program analyst position, but I was in the

HR office and that's how I got into LR. There were no professional development

opportunities there."

Courtney recalled:

"I did have a boss like that, and she wasn't bad, and I think she wanted to see me

do well certainly, but she wasn't someone that would get up and fight for me

either. I've run into that, where you've had the bosses that will go to task with

management for you, and will fight for you, and then others who don't."

Staci stated:

"I think it's a mindset of, 'You know what? You're …' That was really amplified,

I guess I could say it was really amplified there, is that, 'We want you where we

want you. You're fine to be here, but don't even think about going further. How

dare you?' That's my perception. It's like, 'How dare you? You should be

satisfied and be glad at where you are now.'"

The participants had a recognition and understanding of the importance of support

systems to help them navigate through their professional careers.

Networks. The researcher defines or characterizes networks as formal or informal associations and communications that can provide access to information, resources, gatekeepers, and high-level decision makers. Staci recalled a situation in which she was given a very high-level, high-profile project that in her opinion had previously been "rubber stamped." She also mentioned that she received no assistance from her group, and in an effort to complete her project, reached out to her network. Staci declared:

"I can't reach out to my people because all they did was rubber stamp what HHS gave them. I'm having to make my own inroads and create my own networks… That's what I had to do. I had to make inroads and reach out. I even had to reach out when I first got to the agency, reach out to the guy who used to be my counterpart at the Social Security, who's now in charge of labor relations there. It has given me some examples of things. I was not timid about reaching out. Having a network is extremely important.

Dana recalled:

"When she [mentor who became her supervisor] transferred over to Energy someone else was the HR Director, and by that time I knew it was time for me to move. What I started to do is to network basically. As Labor and Employee Relations Specialist, as well as Executive Assistant I'd interacted with a lot of people within the agency, the Treasury, Financial Management Service, so when [individual's name] left I began to network. I started to let people know who were in position, managers and senior executives, I would schedule meetings with them to let them know that I was interested in a career move, or if they had any detail opportunities. I would meet with people…Eventually, another one of the senior

executives at the agency just had a hiring or an opening for anyone Executive Assistant position, but this was a promotion to a 14. This was also one of the persons that I had networked with earlier on… I was selected… So through all of that you can hear a lot of what I did was network. I networked and I would see where change was afoot, I'd sense where things were changing and I would try to get ahead of it as best as I could."

Although only two participants specifically referenced 'networks', several other participants also noted the importance of communicating and working informally with others, in the pursuit of career enhancement. Rachel asserted:

"I listen to people. I follow advice. I've gotten some really good advice over the years. Every time I listen, good things seem to happen."

Anna shared:

"I've had some good studies, some good people that I was able to work with who were more familiar with the field than I was."

When Patty addressed the question regarding formal education, she offered a scenario that she perceived had a direct impact on networks; she asserted:

"For instance, if I've been working in a position all my life as a white male, and my son is getting ready to go to college, I put him on the path that I was on and send him to the same school I went to, and then I introduce him to my friends and colleagues that could bring him in and then when the intern program opens up, we bring him in as an intern and by the time I retire, he's ready to walk into my shoes."

Similar to the support sub-theme, the participants recognized and understood the importance of networks, but also perceived that developing networks required a proactive approach.

Mentors. A vast majority of the participants (nine) recognized mentoring as an important aspect of career development, with seven of the nine specifically acknowledging the support of a mentor during some period of their career. While the other two of the nine did not specifically reference having a mentor, one stated that she herself served as a mentor for someone else, and the other described having the professional guidance and support from her supervisor (which can be defined as a mentor).

Tammy stated:

"One supervisor there actually gave me pointers on which jobs to apply to and how to go about working in the federal government… When I worked at TSA, I had a dynamic mentor. She is the one that actually pushed me to take on the senior leadership roles because I was quite comfortable being a mid-grade manager and just resting there, not looking at going higher. She pushed me and told me the potential that she saw in me. I would attribute it to that last mentor."

Kelli explained:

"I've had the opportunity to work with and be mentored by some African American women who came up through the ranks as I did and who reached the Senior Executive Service (SES). They were able to give me a lot of guidance and feedback on how to proceed with my career goals… In this agency, we had a good number of African American women who had developed professionally. These

women entered government service as I did, as clerks or secretaries and were able to move through the ranks. Watching and listening to them at different forums or sitting down with them, talking with them one on one, and being mentored by them helped me to understand my role and how to navigate the system. Their guidance in terms of selecting the right developmental courses was extremely helpful. Their recommendation helped me to become well-versed in federal practices, appropriation law, employee and labor relations, acquisition."

Courtney recalled:

"Then my boss, who had also been my mentor for many, many, years passed away. It was just quite a bit of transition… Yeah, my mentors and bosses at the time. I mean people come and go through your lives, and I have found it just depends, like my bosses at the time? I've had bad ones, I've had good ones. I've had mediocre bosses. Their influence with management I think matters."

Michelle shared:

"A lot of times I think when other people, and I'm speaking again to supervisors and managers who are in a position to lead you, when they see something in you and put you on a path; that kind of guides you as to where you should go if you're not in the type of series that I'm in."

Patty recalled:

"Early on I was just a clerk typist and then I heard about a program called Upward Mobility. I applied for a position, an Upward Mobility position that took me from GS-7, well no, GS-4 to A. But from that point, I just had good mentors. I had, one of my mentors happened to work at the Defense Employment Equal

Opportunity Institute and told me to come there and learn how to be a specialist. I just have had people in my past that have been very supportive and have seen something in me that I didn't always see in myself, but just pushed me forward."

Dana provided an extremely vivid depiction of how a mentoring relationship advanced her career. Dana said:

"As a management intern, I was assigned a mentor. The mentor that I was assigned, that was in 1990, and she was my mentor, she eventually became my manager, she eventually became the Human Resources Director, she eventually became Ombudsmen Chiefs Human Capital Officer, Energy. Now we're friends. We've been friends for over 25 years and we still mentor one another… I stayed in Labor and Employee Relations like I said for over 10 years. Eventually I was promoted to GS13 and ended up at one point, after having been in Labor and Employee Relations for a period of time, I went over and I served as Executive Assistant to the HR Director. Now the HR Director was my mentor when I came in as a GS5. She and I had developed a relationship. She guided me amongst many obstacles, work-related obstacles and personal relationships as well. I got to see how she managed. At the time I came in she was a GS13 branch manager-- well maybe a 14, I'm not sure. I saw management up close. Like I said she was in a different division and eventually ended up being the HR Director. She put out an announcement for an Executive Assistant and I applied and was selected as her Executive Assistant."

Mentoring, for the participants, played a vital role in professional development and provided opportunities they may not have otherwise had.

Visibility. While all of the participants relayed experiences involving their visibility or access to and participation in high-profile assignments (or the lack thereof), five of the participants specifically referenced this topic and its importance in their career development.

Nicole shared:

"From my perspective, if you weren't blue-eyed, blond-haired, white male, you were not afforded the opportunity to get into those positions. Those were perceived as the cream of the crop type of positons, because you are representing HR to the program areas. You are the face. You became the face of HR so to speak pretty much. Those opportunities, no matter how hard you worked, no matter how good you were in your job, you were just not afforded those opportunities to be in those types of positions."

Courtney explained:

"If you get a lot of visibility and they like you, then they support you… I think it's just something that's become just part of the day-to-day, it's just kind of what I have to do to get support, or to get that visibility… I just don't think that I get the same opportunities to work on maybe more higher-visibility projects and other things that others may have… I think that the only way for me to get any more development or even a higher salary, or just better work, or more visibility, is for me to leave."

Staci asserted:

"I think resources are being exerted to certain groups more over than others. Like I said, it's opportunities, whether you're assigned work that's going to give you

that spotlight. At the VA, my manager absolutely refused to have ... Even though I was the LER manager, she refused to allow me to sit in on the monthly meetings when the medical center directors came in. Refused to."

For Dana and Michelle, their visibility experiences were expressed from a positive perspective, highlighting examples they felt exerted a constructive impact on their professional development. Dana stated:

"I got an opportunity to really see a lot of different divisions, a lot of different--EO, Human Resources, Facilities Management, just a whole host of various kind of administrative program areas. Of course Human Resources had staffing and classification, training, and I went through all of those... I saw management up close...and I applied and was selected as her Executive Assistant. There were others who wanted to be Executive Assistant because there was some, I won't say clout, but yeah, clout associated within the Executive Assistant for the HR Director."

Michelle recalled:

"I was put in a position where I had to step up to the plate and to learn a lot of organizational and administrative facets of the organization. That was a grooming thing for me that led me to where I am today, so it was definitely a positive. Even though the person was sick and even though somebody couldn't touch the financial system due to audit issues, I was still given the opportunity by my supervisor and superiors to get on another type of track within my career...I have been given opportunities to be amongst peers that are my grade level that most are not privy to. I have been given that opportunity and I think it's a

grooming thing for me, so I don't have a lot of ill feelings towards it because I am

given an opportunity to be amongst peers at the senior level."

These participants realized the positive advantages to having access to and participating in high profile projects. However, they also indicated that those opportunities may not be equally accessible to everyone.

Theme 5 – Impact of Education

The sixth theme that emerged from the participants' information was the role or impact of education. The researcher had not initially included any questions that addressed formal education; however, during her interview, Michelle introduced the subject of formal education. When asked if there were any other questions that the researcher had not asked that the participant thought would be relevant to the study, Michelle suggested that the participants be asked how they felt their organizations viewed formal education. The researcher then emailed all of the participants with that question. The participants expressed a perception that there may be a correlation between their formal education and the opportunities for professional development. They indicated that the federal government was moving towards the expectation of more formal education for everyone; however, there appeared to be a higher expectation for African American women. Of the 12 participants, nine felt that their organizations held a high regard for education; however, two of the participants felt that their agencies used formal education as a tool to exclude those who were not desired. Jordan, who has a Master of Public Administration (MPA) asserted:

"My organization fully supports formal education and employee development.

Every year, my organization allots each employee money for developmental

purposes. All training that I've requested has been fully supported. My organization even funded some of the courses needed for my MPA."

Dana shared:

"My current organization, Dept. of HHS, CMS views formal education very strongly. It's probably one of the most 'degree[d]' organization I've ever worked. I don't see a lot of encouragement to go out and get a degree if you don't have one though. I also don't see a lot of assistance in supporting higher learning, in terms of degrees. There is some encouragement for training though."

Tammy, who does not have an academic degree, but has some college explained:

"The organization holds formal education in the highest esteem. The organization actively encourages its employees to further their education by attending higher institutions of learning, beyond the 4 year degree."

Patty, who works for the Department of Defense stated:

"At one point, I think it was, I noticed that people coming in, the question was, 'Are you military or civilian?' Now it's, 'What level of degree do you hold?' It is a big thing at our job, not because you have to have a degree for a lot of the positions, but because it looks good. We did an audit recently of the positions that require a degree and it's not a whole lot that require a degree and now our HR office is going through and relooking at that and making it mandatory to have a certain degree for most positions... Yeah, so those that are there will be grandfathered in, but those who come in will have to have some kind of formal education. A lot of that is how they determine who they bring in."

Anna explained:

> *"My job they're really high on PhDs. If I had a doctor in front of my name that would take me...I'm at the highest of my grade. I can't go any higher as my grade is concerned unless I was an SES, but if I was a PhD I would be able to take on other positions that they really only want PhDs in…A master's is a plus, plus, plus, but really right now the longer I'm in this organization the more they want to replace everybody with somebody that has a PhD."*

When asked how she feels her agency views formal education, Lisa replied:

> *"If you don't have it, they use it to exclude you when they want to exclude you. But, if you don't have one, it doesn't matter. I don't think they place a high value. Our administrator does not have a degree. He's been here seven years. He's the longest running administrator."*

Nicole shared:

> *"Unfortunately, the educational approach within that particular agency, again, which was the previous agency, was just still used as a tool to inhibit African Americans from entering the federal workforce because these positions were also targeted positions. They started out at the GS7 level. They were targeted to the GS12 level. Your careers were already laid out for you; types of positions that are normally not given to African Americans either."*

While, formal education was not initially addressed in the researcher's protocol, the participants felt that it played a significant role in their professional development. There was a sense that, although often times there was no specific requirement for formal

education, there appeared to be a higher expectation for African American women to have more.

Theme 6 – Motivational Factors or Influences

The sixth theme that emerged from participant data was what the researcher termed motivational factors or influences, which captured the various entities that motivated or influenced them in their career advancement efforts. A large number of the participants (seven) indicated that a key motivational factor was the various benefits afforded them as federal employees. Lisa explained:

"[T]his is the place that I've worked the longest, in or out of federal government. I've never worked on a job this long anywhere. Prior to this, my longest employment was at the Provident and that was four and a half years or so, not quite five years. I think I stayed because this is the devil I know. We have a culture here that while it's crazy and it's stressful and it's chaotic, this is our brand of crazy… I stay because if I go somewhere else, then I have to start all over again…If I go somewhere else, it isn't going to be better. It'll just be some other brand of crazy with some people I don't know…I've worked out some perks. I have my own office. I telework five days a week and they don't come after me. They don't bother me. They let me do and they trust that I'm going to do my job."

Rachel stated:

"I really liked the stability of the government and the benefits. I had been with the agency since I was a teenager, and so I felt very comfortable there. I was beginning to establish myself there…being honest, the other big reason was I had just had a child, and I needed a job. I stayed where I was. Again, I was beginning

to establish myself in the division that I worked for, so I thought it was best that I

stay."

Kelli shared:

"I had worked in the private sector in banking prior to coming into the federal

service. What influenced me to come in were ... Some of the benefits that you had

as a federal employee in terms of earning leave and having the paid holidays, but

also having certain protections because I was a witness to a fellow employee

being, for lack of a better word, railroaded into a situation where she was forced

to resign. I think that situation, it lacked compassion because she was dealing

with certain ... With a family issue and had nowhere to go, but there was no help

in terms of our employer helping to maybe steer her into a direction where she

might find some resources to help with her situation. They just allowed her to fall

flat on her face and then end up forcing her to resign from the position and I

didn't like that. I felt that the Federal government offered a certain amount of

protection and had certain programs that would help employees rather than allow

them to just fall."

Another one of the common influences for the participants was family, referenced

by five of the participants. Kelli explained:

"Basically, I had to work because I had to help support a family. That being first

and foremost, helping to support our household along with my husband, that was

my goal. I had to help support my family. I want my children to be able to go to

school, go to college. That was the biggest influence because I needed to help my

family and help them gain the skills that they would need in order to negotiate the

kinds of jobs that they would need to support themselves."

Rachel expressed:

"[B]eing honest, the other big reason was I had just had a child, and I needed a

job. I stayed where I was. Again, I was beginning to establish myself in the

division that I worked for, so I thought it was best that I stay."

Michelle shared that one of the biggest influences on her federal career was her *"Nana"*;
she stated,

"She had been a federal employee since she was the age of I believe; we start out

rather young; she was living in Vienna, Virginia and I think at the age of 16. She

comes from an era where they say we need some typists. She would travel, I think

it was to Keybridge, I think by bus; come into the city and work and then go back

home at the age of 16. When she retired she was a GS-5, which was excellent at

that time…. She encouraged me. I actually left [the federal government] at the

age of 18 because I wanted to do other things and she said, 'You got to get back

in there. They have the best benefits and you can retire from them very

comfortably.'"

One of the other influences shared by some (3) of the participants was spirituality.
Staci shared:

"I mean, these things don't feel good, but as far as how I handle it was a lot

different. Having survived working at food safety, which is very dysfunctional, in

that division, me going over to the VA, and then plus I had also, my spirituality

had also increased, my eyes of discernment had also increased."

Dana stated:

> *"I got the job. I was blown away. I didn't credit myself as much as I thought it*
> *was divine intervention. I credited God a lot of that, because I mean I know I have*
> *skills, but to be able to be placed in the position--and as it turns out, I was the*
> *first black female Labor Relations Officer for the agency... Yeah, it was just--*
> *some people may call it luck, some people call it karma. I just call it divine*
> *intervention, God looking out for me in a number of ways. So that how it ended*
> *up... Like I said, it was a blessing in disguise, because that's how I look at things.*
> *Just as I came here I feel like, okay nobody gave me that job, God gave it to me ,*
> *and so if God gave it to me you can't take it away from me, and if I'm being*
> *moved that means I'm being moved to something better for another reason that*
> *only he can see at this time. That's how I look at life."*

Tammy stated:

> *"Happened, happened stance. I don't want to say luck because I don't believe in*
> *luck, but it was really a lot of answered prayers and initiative on my part to*
> *follow the chosen path for me. Following God's plan allowed me to go up the*
> *ranks."*

During the data analysis, an unexpected connection between some of the participants emerged—the military as an influence. Four of the twelve participants discussed the role the military played in their federal careers. Nicole shared:

> *"My ex-husband was in the military. Shortly after we got married he joined. We*
> *traveled a lot. As a military spouse, I felt the best thing for me to do and being one*
> *of few military spouses at the time with a degree, decided that one of the best*

ways to always try to keep a job because we traveled so much was to become a

part of the federal government. No matter what duty station that he was assigned

to, I was able to always get employment."

Anna stated:

"Well, my husband was military and we were traveling so much, I was trying to

get in, had been trying my whole career so that when he moved my job could

move also. But it just didn't work out that way. I ended up not being able."

Tammy explained:

"Skip into the military, military being military, everyone gets professional

development according to military standards… I guess I'm going to say the

military, because I really identify with the military. It's straight forward. You

have a target in mind and you work to achieve that target. Then you work to

achieve the target above that target… the military ingrained in me the attitude of

it's not just about me. It's about the person to the left, to the right, in front of me

and behind me."

Staci asserted:

"Okay, because I also retired from the National Guard, the Air National Guard,

so there's a military aspect… I retired as a Master Sergeant. I was in positions

that I had to lead."

Motivational factors and influences, while varied, helped to keep the participants directed

towards their professional development aspirations.

Theme 7 – Collective Responsibility

The last theme that materialized during data analysis was a sense of working harder and outperforming others to combat perceived disparate treatment, an obligation to assist others along the way, and the perception of being the 'model' that represents all African American women. Ten out of the 12 participants acknowledged a perception of having to 'go above and beyond' in their jobs or having to remain cognizant and vigilant in their actions, out of a concern of possibly derailing the efforts of other African American women who come behind them.

Burden of Proof. The participants expressed somewhat of a heightened awareness of their race and/or gender, in relation to their conduct and performance. Working harder and longer was a recurring topic found in the data, and the participants perceived that there was a need for them to 'prove' themselves. Courtney asserted:

> *"I don't know if it's being African-American or if it's that I look young. I have found that especially early on, now people know who I am, but especially earlier on I really felt like I had to prove myself extra… I always feel like I have to prove even more, to be accepted…... I don't think I'm afforded the opportunity to make some of the mistakes that others might be able to make, without the same feedback or criticisms or punishment in a sense."*

Rachel stated:

> *"I feel like I always have to be on my P's and Q's… I feel like I have to be more prepared a little bit. You have to make sure that you are measuring up and fighting against stereotypes of African Americans and stereotypes of women."*

Lisa declared:

"The majority of the black people who have elevated in FSIS in my own program, all of us have degrees. There's not one black or African-American woman or man that has been promoted beyond the 12 grade level that did not have a degree but it is frequent, it is almost 90% of the time, that white people who get promoted 13, 14, 15 and all the way to SES are white without degrees and have way less experience than those of us who don't look like them."

Anna explained:

"Being both, it's a really hard question because it just depends where you are in the country. I do know that being both you definitely have to keep your eyes wide open and make sure you are on your toes all the time… In order to move ahead in this organization, and I'm going to say if you're black, you have to prove yourself. There have been some white folks in the organization who have come up the ranks without any formal education… I think that most black people know that to move ahead in this world the competition is really stiff. We have to come to the plate with something on it because you may sit next to somebody and he has nothing on his plate and he's white and he makes it through. But if you're black you better have something on your plate, so don't sit there and cry the blues about it if you don't."

Anna also explained her approach to work requirements and/or expectations; she stated:

"One thing was whenever they asked if I could do something I said yes whether I could do it or not and I raised my hand and said, 'Yes, I can do it.' Because I said I could do it I would start studying and find out how to do it. I spent a lot of nights

until 2, 3, 4 o'clock in the morning at work hanging on the phone with the different vendors like Cisco and some of the big network engineering vendors. Just learned that way and by trial and error."

Jordan stated:

"...being one of the young people, that I've had to work even harder and that feels, sometimes, being a woman, especially a young woman, I have to prove myself a little bit more... In terms of how it impacts me, sometimes it can be a little stressful, a little overwhelming, when I feel like I have to go above and beyond to prove myself... It can be a little overwhelming at times, when you have to, for me, especially, have to work harder than some of my male counterparts where I'm having meetings with the executives or having meetings with specific people. I have to prove myself a lot more because I am a woman in meeting or in trainings and in things like that."

Dana remarked:

"I think I guess the positive is, oftentimes when you're working or reporting to another black female, which I have in at least 2 occasions or 3 occasions, I think that that helps because we understand each other in some regards. We understand, whether it's spoken or not, the steps in which we're walking. We know that we have to carry ourselves differently, we know that we have to dress appropriately, we know we have to look a certain way. I can't go into work looking broke down, for lack of a better word. I have to set a certain standard for myself at all times. Even on dress down day you just dress down in a certain kind of way..."

Going above and beyond to prove worth or value was almost a constant in the lives of the participants. They felt that they often had to tackle *extra steps* to get to the same result, simply based on their identity.

Amplifying the Legacy. Although only three of the participants discussed the sub-theme of 'amplifying the legacy', the researcher felt that the fervor that the participants demonstrated when discussing the topic made it worthy of inclusion in this study. Amplifying the legacy for the participants in this study connotes a responsibility to mentor or provide assistance to others who may also contend with social constructs that marginalize their identity. Staci recounted:

"There was someone I was mentoring, an African-American male who was a presidential management fellow. I really do, from a spiritual standpoint, I felt that my assignment was to, for whatever reason, I was there and I thought ... He said it quite well. He said, 'Look, [Staci's] assignment is done. She was here. I asked God to bring someone here that was going to help me, to show me this job, who was going to help me spiritually and professionally, and she has done that.'... I think that there's an obligation. I think that there is an obligation that we have, I think particularly as an African-American female...I remember telling my siblings, every year we were going to shopping trips until I stopped that.

"I said, 'You know what? Collectively, there are so many years of experience amongst us and we really do have a need. We really need to be giving back, especially to the young African-American women, so that we can advise them and mentor them, coach them so that they don't have to go down somebody's dead-end road or how they need to help them develop their backbone

and confidence of how they deal with it, because they will deal with it. They will

face it and how they react to it, to a situation.'"

Tammy stated:

"Those that are in my immediate area, I have a responsibility to not only look out

for them and protect them, but to also make sure that they have the tools that they

need to get ahead because that's the culture that I most identify with… That

influenced me so much so that I made sure that the person that I had selected and

hired to be my deputy at another agency, that he is now on his way to work

towards becoming an SES. He's an African American."

Kelli explained:

"I thought I could be a role model to someone coming behind me and help mentor

them and influence them, to show them what it's like to be in the workforce and to

be progressive about gaining the skills and the knowledge that you need to move

up to earn a higher salary."

For the participants, there seemed to be somewhat of an unspoken expectation to *pay it*

forward by helping other African American women in the workplace. Many of the

participants indicated that they were assisted by other African American women who

paid it forward for them.

African American Woman Ambassador. While only one of the participants

specifically addressed the concern for the example she set as an African American female

and the potential impact on others, the researcher perceived a 'sense of responsibility' by

the other participants as well. The sentiment of having to 'be on their P's and Q's did not

appear to be simply an expression of concern for how they were perceived, but how African American women in general were perceived. Dana explained:

"I knew that I was the first black Labor Relations Officer for the agency, so you know you are but you don't let it define anything about you. Also I didn't want to be in a position that I messed it up for anyone who came behind me either. When I say messed it up, I didn't want to have anyone to think oh, as a black female you can't handle it. So someone will have that in the back of their mind, if not in that position, the next time it is an opportunity for a black female to be promoted. So you carry those kinds of things with you and you navigate through it... We understand, whether it's spoken or not, the steps in which we're walking. We know that we have to carry ourselves differently, we know that we have to dress appropriately, we know we have to look a certain way."

Carrying the weight of African American women as a whole seemed to permeate the participants' professional outlooks. They seemed to feel that their actions could potentially impact the opportunities for other African American women who came after them.

Summary

This study was designed to explore the perceptions of federally employed African American women of how the intersection of race and gender identities informed their professional development. The participants for this study included 12 participants from various departments across the federal government. The analysis of the participant data resulted in the emergence of seven major themes (see figure 1).

This chapter includes a summary of participant demographics, profiles, and the results of the study. While their individual experiences differed, they shared a commonality in overarching concepts that led to the essence of *transcending thresholds*. The findings of this study indicate that the participants perceive that the experience of professional development requires them to *go above and beyond*. The essence of *transcending thresholds* was reflected in the seven emergent themes. The results of this phenomenological study revealed the following insights regarding their experiences:

1. A perception of having a 'double fight' in the workplace as they contend with their membership in the two socially constructed categories;

2. Their view of being self-aware and the importance of knowing and valuing who you are, what skills you possess, and what is needed to succeed;

3. Recognition of the factors that motivated or influenced them in their careers;

4. A perception of collective responsibility that led to them working hard and outperforming others and sharing their knowledge and experience to help others who were also members of marginalized groups;

5. Their view of navigating challenges and barriers through negotiating identity, struggling, and fighting for career advancement, and managing work/life balance;

6. Their view of support, networks, mentors, and visibility as factors that informed their career development;

7. Perceptions of the role and impact of formal education as a tool in career advancement.

These results are further examined in chapter five, which presents a discussion of the findings (to include summary and interpretation), the implications for practice, and the recommendations for future research.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Recommendations, Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of how the intersection of race and gender for federally employed African American women informed their professional development experiences. It also sought to provide insights into the meaning they held of their experiences as they reflected upon their professional development journey. This study contributes to the paucity of qualitative literature that addresses this subject and provides a different viewpoint by exploring the convergence of race and gender for African American women in the federal workforce and how it informs their professional development. Additionally, it contributes to the field of conflict resolution by providing a deeper understanding of the perspectives of this population, which may help to better address and manage conflicts stemming from their underrepresentation in higher-level positions. It may also assist in the detection of discrimination or unconscious bias and provide a more informed avenue of organizational redress.

This chapter outlines: 1) discussion of the findings, 2) recommendations for practice, 3) recommendations for future research, 4) implications of the findings, and 5) overall conclusion developed from this qualitative enterprise.

Seven major themes emerged from the data analysis, which revealed that overall, the participants: 1) experienced 'twice the fight', 2) contended with challenges or barriers, 3) understood 'self' and recognized the importance of self-efficacy, 4) valued the role and impact of professional development investors (PDIs), 5) recognized the impact of education, 6) acknowledged motivational factors, and 7) subscribed to collective responsibility. These seven themes contributed to a richer understanding of

how race and gender identities informed the professional development experiences of this population.

Discussion of the Findings

The findings of this study suggest that professional development, within the context of the intersection of race and gender, is experienced as a need to transcend thresholds. The participants appear to exercise an additional degree or an elevated level of assiduousness as they contended with racialized and/or gendered stereotypes, challenges and barriers, seeking out professional development investors, perceived need for formal education, and a sense of collective responsibility as they proved their worth. Additionally, they seemed to exert a heightened sense of self-awareness, to better understand how to self-manage and help to manage perceptions of others. The themes that emerged in this study demonstrate that pursuing professional development for this population entails 'going above and beyond' in a host of arenas and the use of personal motivations or influences as encouragement for doing so.

Whether it is opposing stereotypes, combatting challenges and barriers, accessing professional development investors, or pursuing formal education, the experience of professional development for this population appears to require them to exceed standards or expectations set for others.

Theme 1: Twice the Fight

Most (seven) of the participants perceived that race and gender were not separate social constructs describing aspects of their identity, but indicated that the combination of the two created a 'different' identity than the 'sum' of the two separate categories. Patricia Hill Collins argues that:

Black feminist thought fosters a fundamental paradigmatic shift that rejects additive approaches to oppression. Instead of starting with gender and then adding in other variables such as race and social class, Black feminist thought sees these distinctive systems of oppression as being part of one overarching structure of domination. (1991, p. 372)

For these participants, being an African American female was a significant part of their identity, as they did not perceive themselves as one without the other (race or gender). They were consistently confronted with the stereotypes associated with being African American and female; additionally, several of them readily admitted to being impacted by gender specific stereotypes.

The historical impact of stereotypes continues to pervade the lives of African American women as they navigate their career ascension. Bell posits that, "The stereotypes of Black women, the myths impacting their careers, and the broader social conditions informing their lives demand systematic interventions" (Bell, 2004, p. 157). When oppressed groups are continuously assailed by controlling images that depict them not only in an 'other' status, but in a subjugated marginalized manner, it has the potential to cause significant harm as they internalize those stereotypes, which may impact their mental health and socio-economic status (Bedola, 2007, p. 242). The historical images and descriptions assigned to African American women, such as being aggressive, controlling, too strong, or adversarial, exact a pervasive impact on their professional developmental opportunities. Wilkins (2012) argues, "Controlling images inflict narrow cultural images on black women. Depicted as matriarchs, mammies, welfare mothers, and jezebels…Controlling images impose external expectations on behavior and create

internal expectations people use to evaluate their own performances" (pp. 174-175). However, Bell (2004) explains that what has been left out of the equation is the impact and legacy of slavery, in which African American women were not considered female or to possess perceived feminine qualities. She also contends that because African American men were more confined by segregation and racism, African American women assumed the role of 'bread winner', in addition to being the caretaker. She adds that African American women's newfound positionality in the workforce led to their self-reliance, internal strength, and assertiveness, which unfortunately was distorted by Whites as being controlling and manipulative. Regrettably, another consideration for the impacts of stereotypes is the potential for some African American women to actualize the prevalent stereotypes; Bell (1990) offered,

> Due to the prevailing negative stereotypes of black women—aggressive, controlling, authoritarian, militant and hostile—a black woman may soon discover that she is fitting into the harsh, stereotypic images she struggles to avoid. She may need to maintain some of these characteristics at work to succeed in her career. (p. 475)

As managers, leaders, and others in informal networks consider whom they want to invest their time and effort in developing, they would be less than enthusiastic about choosing those who possess stereotypes ascribed to African American women.

Stereotypes in and of themselves may not be problematic; however, when they are acted upon and become prejudice, individuals and the organization suffer. Staci (study participant) noted,

"When you have that level of insecurity, where you've got those isms that are so deeply embedded that it goes beyond reason, it goes beyond benefiting the organization… However, when you take those prejudices and you make decisions that are adverse in nature, that's discriminatory and that's illegal."

The unfortunate side-effect of stereotypes is that they quickly become prejudices and can lead to discrimination, creating greater obstacles for African American women (Catalyst, 2004; Wilkerson, 2008).

Discrimination was also a topic of discussion amongst the participants as they elucidated experiences of 'different treatment' in the workplace based on race, gender, or a combination of the two. African American women pursuing professional development contend with a profusion of stereotypes based on race and gender. Many of the participants felt the 'double whammy' from encounters of race and gender bias, and believed that there was an impact on their career development. Wilkerson (2008) argues that "The crossroads of race and gender often result in workplace prejudices stemming from racial and gender biases that permeate the everyday experiences of African American women as they perform their jobs and seek career advancement in organizations" (p. 116). For African American women, contending with stereotypes and biases based on two simultaneous social constructs creates somewhat untenable circumstances, where as one is addressed, it make activate the other (Wilkins, 2012).

Theme 2: Contending with Challenges or Barriers

During the data collection process, the participants shared various challenges and or barriers they had encountered in the pursuit of professional development. One of the premier challenges presented was what the participants expressed as a need or a

perceived expectation for them to alter their identity to be more in line with the majority's expectations, norms, or traditions. Bell (1990) refers to this phenomenon as assimilation and explains that:

> Assimilation requires blacks to conform to the traditions, values, and norms of the dominant white culture. Under these circumstances, black professional women divest themselves of their culture of origin, the black community. Instead they attempt to fit into the dominant white community, where there are few models or images of black womanhood. (p. 462)

Bell (1990) also offers the concept of 'compartmentalization', which she argues occurs when African American women develop rigid and austere boundaries between white and black environments and regularly conciliates between the two. This point is elucidated by Tammy when she stated, *"When I exited the military and I lived in Japan, again, my telephone voice does not sound ethnic when I want. It depends on what I'm doing."*

However, constant negotiation or shifting of identities can be problematic and cause internal dissonance and conflict for African American women as they navigate their organizational structures. While African American women participate in and value their ethnic, cultural, and community heritages, values, and traditions, in the workplace they also have to adopt the norms, values, traditions, and unwritten rules of the dominant group (White males)—creating a "corporate identity" (Bell, 1990, p. 468). When that dynamic or scenario is consistently played out, African American women may feel that they have betrayed their own culture, possibly creating an 'identity conflict' (Bell, 1990). If in an effort to regain balance between the two worldviews, African American women

embraced more of their own culture, values, and traditions in the workplace, over the 'corporate identity' it may be perceived negatively by the dominant group.

Another challenge for the participants was their sense of having to 'fight' for their career development, with many of them offering the possibility that their struggle may be attributed to negative stereotypes. Bell (1990) asserts that "[B]lack women are left to their own resources for actualizing their visions of professional achievement. Often they are the first of their race and gender to hold a middle or upper level management position in a company" (p. 460). Research shows that access to and participation in developmental programs are essential to advancement opportunities; however, those opportunities remain limited for African American women (Bell, 1990; King & Ferguson, 2001). Fighting for career development, combined with the host of other challenges African American women encounter daily, requires a great deal of strength, fortitude, and sacrifice, and sometimes that sacrifice comes in the form of uneven work/life balance.

Work/life balance was another significant topic affecting the lives of the participants, as they navigated the labyrinth of their careers and personal lives. Women in general, and African American women specifically, are often forced to choose between their personal lives and their professional lives. Often the ascension to higher levels of leadership demands higher levels of commitment of time and energy; however, the participants in this study managed their work/life balance based on the best interest of their families, as well as a deep understanding of themselves.

Theme 3: Understanding Self and Self-Efficacy

The participants in the study overwhelmingly demonstrated a keen sense of self-awareness and most exercised a belief in their self-efficacy, important components of

black feminist scholarship. Self-definition and self-valuation, one of Collins' (1986) three themes in Black feminist thought, are contingent on the African American woman's understanding of self. She asserts that "When Black women define themselves, they clearly reject the taken-for-granted assumption that those in positions granting them the authority to describe and analyze reality are entitled to do so" (Collins, 1986, p. S17). Study participant Staci demonstrated that point when she stated, *"I recognized my value. I don't need someone to validate it."* When African American women better understand themselves and are able to know who they are on their own terms, and not based on the dominant culture's perspectives, the steps to empowerment are realized.

Theme 4: Professional Development Investors

All of the participants in this study shared a recognition of the various entities that play a pivotal role in professional development. While they all understood those various contributors, not everyone had access to them. Consistent with extant literature, one of the primary strategies to career advancement was having a network. Bell (1990) argues,

> Without powerful advocates, the women [African American] often find themselves omitted from important organizational networks and isolated from people who can help hone their professional skills. Consequently, they are forced to navigate uncharted waters when seeking ways to fulfill their career goals. (p. 460)

Participant Staci elucidated this concept when she stated, *"I had to make inroads and reach out,"* which helps to characterize African American women's fate in the workplace if there is not an intervention from advocates.

An additional type of 'advocate' that serves to support individual professional development endeavors is a mentor. Mentors are similar to networks in that they both involve cultivating professional relationships, but mentors provide more informal and directed support. Professional development experiences are greatly enhanced through the assistance of a mentor, as he or she assists in making introductions to decision makers, provides information on advancement opportunities, and connection to those in charge of high-profile projects. According to Catalyst (2004),

> The common theme among most barriers perceived by African-American women is a lack of connection with influential others: not having an influential sponsor/mentor, lack of informal networks, lack of company role models of the same racial/ethnic group, and the lack of high-visibility projects. (p. 12)

Theme 5: Impact of Education

Education was a prevalent theme amongst the participants, with 66 percent of them having a bachelor's degree or higher. The vast majority of the participants felt that formal education was viewed as extremely important to their organizations. This view is consistent with the literature indicating that formal education is central to career advancement (Wilkerson, 2008; Witherspoon, 2009). Additionally, several participants indicated that although historically education had not been held in high regard for positions in the federal government that did not have a positive education requirement, there is change in favor of more education. Current research indicates that education is increasingly becoming a more important factor in career advancement within the federal sector (Wilkerson, 2008; Witherspoon 2009). Federally employed African American

women give themselves a 'leg up' when their education level is higher than what is required for their position, thus giving them an additional layer of credibility.

Theme 6: Motivational Factors

A significant number of participants viewed the benefits that were afforded them as well as their families, as motivation for their continued federal service. They perceived that the federal government provided advantages that were not as readily accessible in the private sector. African American women occupy various precarious positions, as they occupy bicultural or even 'polycultural' locations in regard to their professional lives, personal lives, and community. Maintaining balance amongst the various locations can be stressful at the least, and cause major conflict at worst. King and Ferguson (2001) recognize this positionality and posit,

> Our research identified the issues that black women were encounterinig in their personal, professional, and communal lives. A major issue for women [African American] in the workplace was the overwhelming pull to fulfill multiple expectations from work, family, and community…Efforts to respond to both of these cultures often make it difficult to satisfy family and professional commitments. Moreover, the physical and emotional energy required to negotiate successfully in all of these areas seriously jeopardizes black women's health and well-being. (p. 127)

Several of the participants stated that their positions afforded them the opportunity to work flexible hours and participate in telework, which allows them to better meet the expectations they fulfill in their bicultural or polycultural lives. Putting these benefits into context with some of the challenges and barriers African American

women experienced in the workplace, it would stand to reason that federal supervisors and managers would avail themselves of those flexibilities. As employee motivation impacts productivity and job performance, providing this population with these as well as other motivations helps to break conflict between commitment to the organization and dedication to personal life (Solomon, 2013).

Theme 7: Collective Responsibility

The African American women in the study overwhelmingly expressed a feeling of 'having to go above and beyond' in the work environment. The literature confirms this finding. In her study that explored the perceptions and experiences of female and minority federal employees regarding the glass ceiling effect in the Senior Executive Service (SES), she found that women and minorities perceived that they had to be "twice as good" as their counterparts in order to advance (p. 149). Scales (2010) had the same finding in her study that examined the experiences of African American women in pursuit of advancement to senior executive level leadership; the participants in her study felt they needed to work harder and out perform their peers.

In addition to having to go above and beyond, several participants explained that they also felt they needed to prove themselves, when others who do not look like them were not required to do so. Many of the women interviewed discussed their frustration as a result of having to manage a bicultural life structure, especially the racism they experience in the dominant white culture. Their stories revealed that they were constantly proving their worth, in order to compensate for their race and gender. The women became trapped in the never-ending struggle of having to be 'super-women', always competent and ready to perform (p. 459).

Although many of the participants admitted to being the benefactor of a mentoring or coaching relationship, only a few (three) of the participants expressed a desire to 'pay it forward' to provide others with assistance in navigating the professional development labyrinth in their organizations. In her study exploring the lived experiences of how African American women developed as leaders, Davis (2012) found that,

> This research study showed that African American women recognize the vital role of mentoring other African American females, but not enough mentoring relationships are established to prepare African [American] women for leadership roles. By paying it forward, the experiences of African American women senior leaders could provide a roadmap for African American women aspiring to advance to senior leadership roles. (p. 166)

King and Ferguson argue that it is the patriarchal and hegemonic society that causes the divide and conquer effect, thus African American women must support one another in order to begin to destabilize and dismantle that oppressive system.

Limitations

While these findings contribute to the compendium of literature providing insight to better understanding African American women's experiences with professional development in the federal government, there are some significant limitations that must be mentioned.

One limitation lies with one of the shortcomings of many qualitative approaches—generalizability. The findings of this study cannot be generalized due to a small sample size that was not representative. This limitation, however, is reconciled by

the in-depth rich descriptions provided by the participants, which falls in line with a phenomenological approach.

Another limitation involves the collection method. Although the participants were provided the opportunity to conduct a face-to-face interview, all 12 participants chose to interview via the method most convenient for them—telephonic. While telephonic interviews provide a tremendous amount of vivid descriptions, the opportunity to observe nonverbal cues and body language (which provide additional rich data) is not available.

Recommendations for Practice

Based on the data provided by the participants regarding their perceptions on how race and gender inform their professional development, there are areas of practices that would benefit from a thorough review. The results of this study suggest that there are various areas of practice requiring examination, which are offered here as recommendations:

1) African American women pursuing career development should diligently pursue and develop strategic relationships in the form of mentors, networks, and other support systems, which will be a valuable tool for access to opportunities and resources.

2) African American women should develop more effective conflict management strategies as they encounter disparate treatment, unconscious bias, or discrimination. Often, how the situation is managed helps to determine the outcome, and exercising professional, constructive tactics will help yield a better result.

3) African American women should be persistent in expanding the legacy by assisting other African American women navigate their career development journey. They should work with others and share the experience and knowledge within the scope of the themes that emerged in the study such as: how to contend with 'twice the fight' encounters, the importance of self-awareness and self-determination, how to circumvent or navigate challenges and barriers, and the importance of paying it forward.

4) Organizational leaders should review their current career development policies and programs, and in concert with this population, make changes that would be more inclusive and provide more opportunities.

5) Organizational leaders should reach out and demonstrate to African American women the process for establishing strategic partnerships that will be valuable for their career progression.

6) Organizational leaders should work to change the current organizational culture to incorporate a sense of understanding, inclusiveness, and collaboration through dialogue and continued support of this population.

Recommendations for Future Research

The results of this study contribute to the limited body of qualitative literature on the professional development experiences of federally employed African American women regarding their perceptions of the intersection of race and gender. This study provides a different viewpoint to the literature, and although a great deal of information was obtained through the lenses of the participants, there is more exploration required. Since this study focused on federally employed African American women, further study

could be conducted on state government and non-profit organizations. The data gleaned from such studies could provide rich data that further explores the nuances of professional development in those public service arenas. Additionally, the framework of this study could be used to conduct a similar study for other women of color in federal service, addressing their perceptions of how race and gender informs their professional development.

Implications of Findings

The study's expected contribution is to enhance current scholarship on the convergence of race and gender and how it is perceived to inform the experience of professional development for federally employed African American women by providing a different viewpoint from the normative majority discourse. This study provides a forum and a stage for their voices to be heard. The results of this study are significant for a deeper understanding of the professional development experiences of African American women for improving and increasing developmental opportunities. This study provides managers, supervisors, and other decision makers with salient information on a growing population in the workforce, which will assist them in meeting future human capital challenges. Another significant factor of this study is that it will help them better recognize various forms of discrimination or unconscious bias and, in concert with this population, develop strategies to better address them through policy and practice. African American women can use the results of this study to gain valuable insights into their positionality, and to develop more productive conflict management strategies that help them better address perceived disparities and underrepresentation.

Contributions to the Field of Conflict Analysis and Resolution

An expected contribution is to enhance the literature in the conflict resolution field by beginning a conversation that can lead to a deeper understanding of how the intersection of race and gender identities informs the professional development of African American women in the federal workforce and what meaning it holds for them. Creating a space for that discussion may lend itself to better opportunities to more effectively address and manage conflicts stemming from their underrepresentation in higher-level positions. Additionally, there is an expected contribution for the development of more effective strategies designed to address possible workplace conflict experienced by this population, which in turn may effectuate constructive policy changes designed to help manage, reduce, or resolve those workplace conflicts. As a final note, results of this study are expected to contribute to the discovery of discrimination or unconscious bias which can then be addressed.

Conclusion

This purpose of this qualitative study was to explore how federally employed African American women perceived the convergence of race and gender and how it informed their professional development. The experiences freely and graciously shared by the participants led to seven themes, which were extremely informative, and the researcher hopes will be instrumental in building a bridge between African American women and the organizations in which they work.

Although this study presents new data to explore an old problem, it allowed the researcher to contribute to the compendium of literature in a host of fields, from organizational development to human resource development, as well as to conflict

analysis and resolution. This study provided a forum for a group of federally employed African American women to collectively share their 'voice' regarding their experiences with interlocking systems of oppressions. As African American women have historically been recipients of dual marginalization, it is the desire of this researcher that this study's results be instrumental in the development of a framework of freedom from oppression, which may begin with African American women themselves, as Collins (1991) states, "When members of excluded groups like African-American women are actively involved in defining African-American women's standpoints on our own terms, we become empowered" (p. 373).

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Appendix A: Institutional Review Board Consent to Conduct Study

NOVA SOUTHEASTERN UNIVERSITY

MEMORANDUM

To: Betsy A. Kelly Bell, M.A.
   Graduate School of Humanities and Social Sciences

From: David Thomas, M.D., J.D. WKS for Dr. Thomas
    Chair, Institutional Review Board

Date: December 17, 2014

Re: *Intersection of Race and Gender: A Phenomenological Study of the Professional Development Experience for African American Women in the Federal Government* –
   NSU IRB No. 12081408Exp.

I have reviewed the revisions to the above-referenced research protocol by an expedited procedure. On behalf of the Institutional Review Board of Nova Southeastern University, *Intersection of Race and Gender: A Phenomenological Study of the Professional Development Experience for African American Women in the Federal Government* is approved in keeping with expedited review category #6 and #7. Your study is approved on **December 17, 2014** and is approved until **December 16, 2015**. You are required to submit for continuing review by **November 16, 2015**. As principal investigator, you must adhere to the following requirements:

1) CONSENT: You must use the stamped (dated consent forms) attached when consenting subjects. The consent forms must indicate the approval and its date. The forms must be administered in such a manner that they are clearly understood by the subjects. The subjects must be given a copy of the signed consent document, and a copy must be placed with the subjects' confidential chart/file.

2) ADVERSE EVENTS/UNANTICIPATED PROBLEMS: The principal investigator is required to notify the IRB chair of any adverse reactions that may develop as a result of this study. Approval may be withdrawn if the problem is serious.

3) AMENDMENTS: Any changes in the study (e.g., procedures, consent forms, investigators, etc.) must be approved by the IRB prior to implementation.

4) CONTINUING REVIEWS: A continuing review (progress report) must be submitted by the continuing review date noted above. Please see the IRB web site for continuing review information.

5) FINAL REPORT: You are required to notify the IRB Office within 30 days of the conclusion of the research that the study has ended via the IRB Closing Report form.

The NSU IRB is in compliance with the requirements for the protection of human subjects prescribed in Part 46 of Title 45 of the Code of Federal Regulations (45 CFR 46) revised June 18, 1991.

Cc: Dr. Robin Cooper
  Dr. Ismael Muvingi
  Mr. William Smith

NOVA SOUTHEASTERN UNIVERSITY

Consent Form for Participation in the Research Study Entitled
The Intersection of Race and Gender: A Phenomenological Study of How Federally Employed African
American Women Experience Professional Development

Funding Source: None.

IRB protocol #:

Principal investigator(s)
Betsy A. Kelly Bell, MA
1128 Litchborough Way
Wake Forest, NC 27587
(240) 676-1975

Co-investigator(s)
Robin Cooper, PhD
Nova Southeastern University Graduate
School of Humanities & Social Sciences
3301 College Avenue
Fort Lauderdale, FL 33314
(954) 262-3048

For questions/concerns about your research rights, contact:
Human Research Oversight Board (Institutional Review Board or IRB)
Nova Southeastern University
(954) 262-5369/Toll Free: 866-499-0790
IRB@nsu.nova.edu

What is the study about?
You are invited to voluntarily participate in a research study which will explore the lived experiences of
federally employed African American women pursuing professional development.

Why are you asking me?
You have been invited to participate because you are an African American female working in the federal
government. In total, there will be approximately ten (10) adult women engaged in this study.

What will I be doing if I agree to be in the study?

You will be participating in a semi-structured interview in a private and safe location, lasting approximately
60-90 minutes. About 7-10 days after the interview, you will receive a transcribed copy of your interview to
review and make any corrections, revisions, omissions, or add additional information for data collection. You
will have the opportunity to return transcribed copy to the researcher in a self-addressed stamped envelope
provided by the researcher.

Initials: _____ Date: _____

Page 1 of 4

Is there any audio or video recording?

This research will include audio recording of responses to the semi-structured interview questions. The interviews will be recorded with a digital voice recorder. The audio recordings will be made available to be heard by the researcher, Betsy A. Kelly Bell, personnel from the Institutional Review Board, and the Dissertation Chair, Dr. Robin Cooper. The audio recordings will be transcribed by a professional and reputable company and used for research purposes only. The audio recordings will be kept in a locked safe in the secure home office of Betsy A. Kelly Bell. The audio recordings and transcriptions will be kept for a minimum of 36 months and then destroyed via cross-cut shredding. Since voices can potentially be identified by others who hear the audio recordings, complete confidentiality for things you say on the recording cannot be guaranteed, although the researcher will try to limit access to those identified above.

What are the dangers to me?
Risks to you are minimal, meaning they are not thought to be greater than other risks you experience every day. Your semi-structured interview responses will be kept confidential, and will only be used to compile relevant data for analysis purposes. You will not be asked to publicly divulge any aspect of your professional development experiences. However, since you will be participating in an audio recording, there is a potential that you will lose a degree of anonymity and confidentiality as a result of your oral responses. Information privacy may pose a risk to you. Specific measures to minimize privacy risks are discussed below (please see next page).

From an emotional perspective, if you choose to reveal aspects of your lived experiences of your life regarding professional development, you may find that sharing your feelings may make you anxious or bring back unhappy emotions or memories. If this happens, researcher Betsy A. Kelly Bell will try to help calm and comfort you. If those feelings persist, she will recommend contacting the Employee Assistance Program and contact the gatekeeper to assist with de-escalating your emotions. You will never be required or pressured to reveal anything of a personal or sensitive nature. If you have any questions about the research and/or your research rights, please contact Betsy A. Kelly Bell at 240-676-1975 or Dr. Robin Cooper at 954-262-3048. You may also contact the IRB at the numbers indicated above with questions as to your research rights.

Are there any benefits for taking part in this research study?
Your participation may potentially assist you in positively framing your professional development experiences in more constructive behaviors that promote improved relationships. You may also potentially gain new insights into how your previous life experiences regarding professional development have affected your conflict

Initials: _____ Date: _____   Page 2 of 4

to your willingness to continue to participate, this information will be provided to you by the investigators.

Voluntary Consent by Participant:
By signing below, you indicate that
- this study has been explained to you
- you have read this document or it has been read to you
- your questions about this research study have been answered
- you have been told that you may ask the researchers any study related questions in the future or contact them in the event of a research-related injury
- you have been told that you may ask Institutional Review Board (IRB) personnel questions about your study rights
- you are entitled to a copy of this form after you have read and signed it
- you voluntarily agree to participate in the study entitled "Intersection of Race and Gender: A Phenomenological Study of How Federally Employed African American Women Perceive Professional Development

Participant's Signature: _____ Date: _____

Participant's Name: _____ Date: _____

Signature of Person Obtaining Consent: _____

Date: _____

NOVA SOUTHEASTERN UNIVERSITY
Institutional Review Board
Approval Date: DEC 1 7 2014
Continuing Review Date: DEC 1 6 2015

Initials: _____ Date: _____   Page 4 of 4

to your willingness to continue to participate, this information will be provided to you by the investigators.

Voluntary Consent by Participant:
By signing below, you indicate that
- this study has been explained to you
- you have read this document or it has been read to you
- your questions about this research study have been answered
- you have been told that you may ask the researchers any study related questions in the future or contact them in the event of a research-related injury
- you have been told that you may ask Institutional Review Board (IRB) personnel questions about your study rights
- you are entitled to a copy of this form after you have read and signed it
- you voluntarily agree to participate in the study entitled "Intersection of Race and Gender: A Phenomenological Study of How Federally Employed African American Women Perceive Professional Development

Participant's Signature: _____ Date: _____

Participant's Name: _____ Date: _____

Signature of Person Obtaining Consent: _____

Date: _____

NOVA SOUTHEASTERN UNIVERSITY
Institutional Review Board
Approval Date: DEC 1 7 2014
Continuing Review Date: DEC 1 6 2015

Initials: _____ Date: _____   Page 4 of 4

Appendix B: Participant Recruitment Letters

Dear: _____

    My name is Betsy A. Kelly Bell (Becky) and I am a PhD candidate at Nova Southeastern University. I am conducting a research study entitled: Intersection of Race and Gender: A Phenomenological Study of How Federally Employed African American Women Experience Professional Development. The purpose of the research study is to explore how African American women working in the federal government perceive how race and gender have influenced their professional development.

    I am recruiting women who are currently working in the federal government in the grades of GS-13 through GS-15, have worked in the federal government for at least ten (10) years.

    I will be asking participants to discuss their professional development experiences in semi-structured interviews that will last approximately 60-90 minutes. The interviews will be audio recorded to capture the responses. To help ensure confidentiality and privacy, pseudonyms will be used in place of real names, if needed, throughout the study's process. The interviews will take place at a time and location that is convenient to you, or telephonically. Please contact me to discuss further; I can be reached at 240-676-1975 or at bb869@nova.edu, or you may contact Dr. Robin Cooper at robicoop@nova.edu or 954-262-3048.

Sincerely,

Betsy A. Kelly Bell

NOVA SOUTHEASTERN UNIVERSITY
Institutional Review Board
Approval Date: DEC 17 2014
Continuing Review Date: DEC 16 2015

Dear: _____

     Thank you for your interest in my dissertation on the Intersection of Race and Gender: A Phenomenological Study of How Federally Employed African American Women Experience Professional Development. As a student at Nova Southeastern University, I value the unique contribution you can make to my study and I am excited about the possibility of your participation. The purpose of this letter is to reiterate some of the things we have already discussed via email or telephonically, and to secure your signature on the participation release form you will find attached.

     The research model I am employing is a qualitative one through which I am seeking comprehensive rich descriptions your lived experiences while pursuing professional development. My goal is to utilize this information to help illuminate or answer the question: "How the intersection of race and gender is perceived as informing the professional development of experience of federally employed African American women?" Approximately ten (10) individuals will be participating in this study in which they will be asked to recall specific developmental experiences, situations, or events they have experienced while pursuing professional development. I am seeking vivid, accurate and salient portrayals of what these experiences were like for you. These portrayals may include your thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, as well as places and people connected to your experiences.

     I value your participation and thank you in advance for the commitment of time, energy, and effort. If you have any further questions before signing the release form or if there is a problem with the agreed upon date and time of our meeting, I can be reached at 240-676-1975 or at bb869@nova.edu.

Sincerely,

Betsy A. Kelly Bell

NOVA SOUTHEASTERN UNIVERSITY
Institutional Review Board
Approval Date: DEC 1 7 2014
Continuing Review Date: DEC 1 6 2015

Appendix C: Participant Release Agreement

I agree to participate in a research study of the "Intersection of Race and Gender: A Phenomenological Study of How Federally Employed African American Women Experience Professional Development." I understand the purpose and nature of this study, and I am participating voluntarily. I grant permission for the data to be used in the process of completing a PhD degree, including a dissertation and any other future publication. I understand that a brief synopsis of each participant, including myself, will be used and will include the following information: work location, your job series, amount of time worked in federal government, amount of time in current job, and any other pertinent information that will help the researcher come to know and recall each participant. I grant permission for the above personal information to be used. I agree to meet at the following location: _____
_____ on the following date: _____ at (time): _____ for an initial individual semi-structured interview for 60-90 minutes. If necessary, I will be available at a mutually agreed upon time and place for an additional 30-60 minute interview. I also grant permission to audio record the interview(s).

For questions/concerns about your research rights, contact:
Human Research Oversight Board (Institutional Review Board or IRB)
Nova Southeastern University
(954) 262-5369/Toll Free: 866-499-0790
IRB@nsu.nova.edu

_____   _____   _____   _____
Research Participant   Date   Primary Investigator   Date

NOVA SOUTHEASTERN UNIVERSITY
Institutional Review Board
Approval Date: DEC 1 7 2014
Continuing Review Date: DEC 1 6 2015

Appendix D: Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

Research Study Title: Intersection of Race and Gender: A Phenomenological Study of the Professional Development Experience for African American Women in the Federal Government

Participant Code Number:

Interview Start Time:

Interview Stop Time:

Date:

Place:

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study that explores how federally employed African American women perceive the intersection of race and gender and how it informs their professional development. Please be reminded that your privacy will be protected and all identifying information you share will be kept confidential. If you wish to withdraw from this study at any time, you may do so with no consequence, and the collected data will not be used in the study.

You are participant #___. If there are no questions, I will begin the interview, as well as the recording.

Research Questions

Demographic Questions
1. How long have you worked in the Federal government? In your Agency?
2. What is your current job series?
3. At what pay grade did you enter the federal service?
4. How long have you been in your current grade?

Semi-structured Interview Questions
1. Describe your professional development within the Federal Government.
2. Describe the factors you feel contributed negatively, positively, or neutrally to your professional development.
3. What most influenced your career decisions?
4. What has impacted your career decisions more, race or gender? Please explain.
5. Please share an experience you have had where being an African American woman impacted your career development, positively, negatively, or neutrally.
6. Do you identify more with being African American or female? Please explain.
7. As an African American woman, describe how you perceive the intersection of race and gender and its impact.
8. What, if any, organizational challenges have you encountered?
9. How did you handle them?

10. If you were asked to describe yourself, what words would you use, and why?
11. How do you feel you are perceived by: your colleagues, your supervisors/managers, and/or your subordinates?
12. Describe your Agency's culture (atmosphere, environment).
13. What organizational structures or cultures influenced your career the most and why?
14. How do you feel your organization's culture views African American women?
15. Is there someone else you think I should speak with who has relevant information on this subject?
16. Is there something else you think I should ask that would be relevant to this subject?

Appendix E: Thank You Letter

Dear: _____   Date:

      Thank you for meeting with me in an extended semi-structured interview and sharing your lived experiences. I appreciate your willingness to share your unique and personal thoughts, feelings, events and situations.

      I have enclosed your transcribed interview and ask that you review the entire document. Please review the transcription and ensure the interview fully captured your lived experiences. After reviewing the transcript, you may realize that an important lived experience(s) was neglected. Please feel free to add comments, with the enclosed red pen, which would further elaborate your lived experience(s). If preferred, we can arrange a meeting to audio record your additions or corrections. Please do not edit for grammatical corrections. The way you told your lived experiences is what is critical.

      When you have reviewed the verbatim transcript and have had the opportunity to make changes and additions, please return the transcript in the stamped addressed envelope. I have greatly valued your participation in this research study and your willingness to share your lived experiences. If you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact me at 240-676-1975 or bb869@nova.edu.

Sincerely,

Betsy A. Kelly Bell
Betsy A. Kelly Bell