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A Qualitative Study Examining the Empowerment of African-American Women and the
Microaggressive Experiences Faced in Managerial Leadership Roles

A Dissertation Submitted in partial fulfillment of the
Requirements for the degree
Doctor of Education in Organizational Change and Administration

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Dr. Robert K. Jabs School of Business

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A Qualitative Study Examining the Empowerment of African-American Women and the
Microaggressive Experiences Faced in Managerial Leadership Roles

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has been approved by the Dr. Robert K Jabs School of Business in partial fulfillment of the
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ABSTRACT

Intersectionality theory, as posited by Nishii (2013), recognizes that individuals embody multiple intersecting identities, including but not limited to race, gender, class, and sexuality. This theory is particularly useful in understanding the nuanced experiences of African American women in the corporate workplace, as it elucidates how their experiences are shaped by the intersection of their race and gender. Rather than examining race and gender in isolation, intersectionality theory underscores the importance of exploring the interconnected nature of these identities. In the context of empirical research, the recruitment of participants for this study was carried out using snowball sampling. This approach entails the identification and recruitment of participants through existing study subjects, thereby enabling the inclusion of individuals with specific characteristics or experiences relevant to the research focus. Furthermore, employing a phenomenological design is integral to gaining insights into individuals' lived experiences and subjective interpretations of a given phenomenon. By delving into the subjective meanings that individuals attribute to their experiences, phenomenological research sheds light on how individuals make sense of the world around them, contributing to a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under examination.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

“I find the backbone of a mother to be the strongest, yet most pliable of them all; to bend over backward and still be a pillar—some call it magic.” ~ Ka’ala

To my mom, Dorothy A. Morris, none of this would have been possible without you and your unwavering support. I was never really a great student, and it took me years to find out that I was dyslexic. However, you still believe in me, and God obviously had other plans for me.

Your love, support, and guidance have been invaluable in shaping me into the person I am today. Your selflessness and kindness have been a constant source of inspiration for me, and I feel truly blessed to have you as my mother.

Thank you for being my biggest cheerleader, believing in me when I did not believe in myself, and constantly pushing me to be my best. I love you more than words can express, and I will always be grateful for the gift of your love.

To my grandmother, thank you for all your love and encouragement throughout this process. I pray that I can honor your 104th birthday with the gift of completing my doctorate.

To my friend, my mentor, my sister from another mister, Tawana Tarbeart, you are the epitome of poise and grace and the prime example of why this subject matter is so very important. God has a way of shining light in the ugly corners of darkness and revealing to the world what it already knows is true.

To my chair, Dr. Denise Nixon, and my dissertation committee, your willingness to dedicate time to thoroughly review and provide constructive criticism has truly enriched the quality of my research. Your encouragement and patience during this challenging endeavor have not gone unnoticed.

DEDICATION

To my dad, Earl Morris, Sr.,

As I journey through life's milestones, your absence weighs heavy on my heart, especially as I embark on this significant achievement of becoming Dr. Nicole ZsaNette Morris. Your unwavering love, guidance, and support have shaped me into the person I am today, and I carry your memory with me every step of the way.

Though you may not be here to witness my graduation, know that your spirit and legacy live on through me. Every success, triumph, and obstacle overcome is a testament to the values you instilled in me. Your presence is felt in the quiet moments of reflection, in the laughter shared with loved ones, and in the courage to pursue my dreams relentlessly.

I miss you more than words can express, and my heart aches with the knowledge that you are not here to celebrate this milestone with me. But I find solace in the knowledge that you are watching over me, proud of the person I have become and the heights I have yet to reach.

This achievement is not just mine; it is a tribute to the man who believed in me unconditionally who nurtured my ambitions with his wisdom and kindness. I dedicate this success to you, Dad, with all the love in my heart. You will forever be my guiding light, my inspiration, and my beloved father.

With eternal love and gratitude...

Dr. Nicole ZsaNette Morris"

~ We did it Daddy

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Women of color, particularly African-American women, are significantly underrepresented in managerial leadership positions in Fortune 500 companies (Frye, 2019; McGirt, 2017; Sales et al., 2019). This lack of representation has persisted since the beginning of time and calls for an in-depth investigation into the driving forces behind it. Therefore, the aim of this research is to identify and understand the factors that contribute to the underrepresentation of African-American women in managerial leadership positions in American companies (Cottrill et al., 2014).

The significance of this study cannot be overstated. First, it highlights the persistent disparities in leadership positions and the need for diversity and inclusivity in corporate leadership (Frye, 2019). Second, it provides insights into African-American women's specific challenges in advancing to executive leadership positions (Frye, 2019). Third, it can inform corporate policies and practices to overcome the barriers that limit the representation of women of color in leadership positions (Frye, 2019).

The literature review conducted as part of this research examines studies related to the factors that limit African-American women from occupying leadership roles (Sales et al., 2019). These studies suggest that African-American women are limited by factors such as lower levels of education, cultural beliefs that men are supposed to lead, a lack of moral & mentoring support, and discrimination at workplaces, especially regarding promotions (McGirt, 2017). By identifying these factors and understanding their impact on women of color, steps can be taken to address them and work towards a more equitable and diverse corporate leadership landscape.

For many decades, women of color have faced significant challenges and barriers, particularly in the corporate sector. Sadly, they have often been relegated to the lowest rungs of

society, struggling against systemic discrimination and inequality. Despite their significant contributions, many women of color continue to face barriers to success and advancement in their chosen fields, making it difficult for them to thrive and achieve their full potential. This has resulted from policies, such as the Equal Pay Policy and the Paycheck Fairness Act, that have largely ignored them at the corporate and governmental levels and historically relegated them to second-class citizens, generally facing both gender and racial discrimination (Frye, 2019). However, in the last 10+ years, there has been recognition in the fight for their rights in general society and the corporate environment (Hinton & Lambert, 2022).

In 2021, the United States government introduced the National Strategy on Gender Equity and Equality. This strategy is designed to promote gender equality and ensure women are given equal opportunities and recognition in various areas (Charlton, 2019). It includes specific measures to amplify women's voices and address gender-based discrimination. The National Strategy on Gender Equity and Equality marks a significant step towards creating a more inclusive and fair society. Women's struggles and the reprieve such organizations offer is an essential area of study that must be explored. It is crucial to study how they have empowered the group and where improvements may be necessary (Charlton, 2019).

A quantitative study by the Center for American Progress in 2021 revealed that while African Americans constitute around 13% of the U.S. population, they hold just 8% of all top leadership positions across various sectors and industries. (Charlton, 2019) Moreover, the figures are even more disappointing when it comes to executive roles, with only 1.6% of African American women occupying such positions. There is a significant concern about enhancing diversity in the workplace, considering both the gender gap and race in professional and executive positions. The issue of augmenting diversity in the workplace has become a significant

concern in recent times, particularly concerning the gender gap and racial disparities in professional and executive roles (Collins, 2015; Tucker & Patrick, 2017). There is a significant disparity in the number of African American women who make it to executive positions, resulting in various consequences of inequality. The consequences include a loss of motivation and some even quitting their jobs. Moreover, these inequality challenges and this group's ambition have inspired African-American women to start their own companies (Charlton, 2019).

According to a report titled "Being Black in Corporate America" by the Center for Talent Innovation (CTI), which is a non-profit organization that concentrates on workplace diversity and is backed by major corporations like Morgan Stanley, Pfizer, and Disney, the current diversity and inclusion initiatives are not effectively serving African-American professionals. The study surveyed 3,736 full-time professionals of various races and concluded that African-American professionals must be included in today's efforts to promote diversity and inclusion in the workplace (Dobbin & Kalev, 2016).

It is noted that White peers and Black employees are more likely to understand the concerns of gender equality better than they can understand racial inequality (Green, 2019). Gender equality is a crucial issue that needs to be dealt with effectively. Gender equality must be extended to all women, regardless of race or ethnicity (Green, 2019). In the United States, for instance, gender equality of both White and African American women, among other ethnic minorities, should be given equal attention (Charlton, 2019). A solution implemented in some European countries and California to grant women more equitable workplaces is establishing a minimum number of corporate executive representations for women and African Americans. These solutions have effectively promoted women and African Americans to executive company positions and being included on company boards. As a result, more African-American women

have been included on boards of directors, contributing to a more diverse and inclusive corporate culture (Charlton, 2019).

Background

During the mid-20th century, the United States witnessed its most significant civil rights movement. African Americans protested against institutionalized racism and sought constitutional equality at the national level. The movement successfully ended de jure segregation, with the federal government intervening to enforce civil rights through the passage of executive orders and two Civil Rights Acts (Back, 2020). The Civil Rights Act of 1957 established the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, which played a crucial role in shaping the landmark Civil Rights Act of 1964, with provisions prohibiting discrimination based on race, gender, religion, and national origin (Back, 2020). However, not all minorities experienced equal gains in civil rights, with Hispanics facing mass deportations, educational segregation, and police brutality. In contrast, the women's rights movement saw significant gains, including the passage of the Equal Pay Act of 1963 and the prohibition of gender-based discrimination in the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (Back, 2020).

The scarcity of empowerment of women of color, particularly African-American women, has been a concern for multiple decades (Strickland, 2022). This lack of empowerment is closely tied to second-wave feminism and even the civil rights movement (Brown et al., 2017; Strickland, 2022). Empowering African-American women began gaining steam in these areas and has been evolving and improving. For example, an examination of feminist literature from previous decades showed that the feminist movement, having started in 1848, was focused on the equality of White women (Hinton & Lambert, 2022). In theory, feminism advocated for every woman, but the White female was prioritized over the rest. As noted by Brown et al. (2017), "the

feminist movement has been accused of focusing largely on the concerns of White women and generally avoiding the concerns of African American women" (p. 179). However, as strides were made, the issue of the Black woman at the bottom of the pile started coming to the forefront. The fallacy that White women could be empowered and represent the rest of women in society was debunked, especially in recent years (Brown et al., 2017).

This new feminist movement also helps explain why a concerted effort exists to elevate Black women. Upon reviewing literature from previous studies, it becomes apparent that Black women have consistently been marginalized and oppressed, often finding themselves at the bottom of the social hierarchy and underrepresented in various aspects of life. (Blosser, 2019; Castelin & White, 2022; Dowe, 2020; Iheduru-Anderson et al., 2022; Prather et al., 2018). Predominantly, women's rights have primarily been associated with White women, sometimes at the expense of Black women (Brown et al., 2017). This is why organizations like the Feminist Movement focus on creating programs centered around diversity, equity, and inclusion for these individuals. Scholars also recognize the importance of studying African-American women's obstacles in the workplace and tracking their advancement toward freedom from oppression and empowerment (Brown et al., 2017).

This study focused on the challenges faced in measuring the success of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives in relation to Black women (Hinton & Lambert, 2022). To achieve this, the literature examines the initiatives, their impacts, and the gaps they may have encountered. In addition, the study addresses the initiatives about diversity, inclusion, and equity in the last ten years to see their impact on women of color and their empowerment and what can be done to enhance the positive aspects of such an impact.

Not only are more women needed in the workforce, but women also need more leadership positions in their workplaces, including in the government. Even when included in participative leadership, they are likelier to do it as junior employees or managers but hardly as executives (Black Enterprise, 2019). This is mainly because historically, with primarily male dominance in corporate leadership, prominent companies in the United States still stereotype women as the weaker gender, affected by emotions, attitudes, and physiological and social problems that make them less dedicated to their work than their male counterparts (Black Enterprise, 2019).

The problem of being part of a minority group's role in family expectations in African-American families is also a concern. Given the historical oppression of the Black community in slavery, most parents in the 19th century and the early 20th century did not have sufficient education to assist them in working in leadership positions in many companies (Green, 2019). Their children were also not afforded quality education, as the best colleges and universities were reserved for the White community. The development of the Historical Black Colleges & Universities (HBCU) was to address this deficit and enhance the chances of education for the Black community, as they have played a crucial role in providing educational opportunities to African Americans who were once legally denied an education. Moreover, these institutions have created a nurturing environment where African American students can explore their collective identities and rich cultural heritage.

Statement of the Research Problem

The problem addressed is the lack of research in corporate diversity and inclusion addressing the underrepresentation of African-American women in managerial leadership roles and the lived microaggressive experiences in relation to career advancement. According to

Iheduru-Anderson et al. (2022), this research aimed to contribute to the existing literature concerning diversity and inclusion in the workplace, specifically concerning African-American women in managerial leadership positions. The underrepresentation of African American women in the workplace and the microaggressions they encounter reflect the absence of diversity. While this study aimed to address this research gap, it is crucial to acknowledge that it cannot rectify the root cause of the issue. Despite the progress made in recent years, this group continues to experience various microaggressions that hinder their career advancement (Steinmetz, 2020). Therefore, it is essential to conduct a qualitative study examining African-American women's lived experiences in managerial leadership roles and their microaggressive encounters to identify potential solutions for promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion in this field (Strickland, 2022).

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this phenomenological descriptive qualitative study is to explore corporate diversity and inclusion initiatives focused on addressing the underrepresentation of African-American women in managerial leadership roles and their lived microaggressive experiences in career advancement. According to Tucker and Patrick (2017), in 2016, almost half of the low-wage workforce consisted of women of color, with Black women comprising 18%, Latina women comprising 24%, and Asian, Hawaiian, or Pacific Islander women comprising 7%. The Bureau of Labor 2022 statistics report revealed that Black (10.2%) and Hispanic (10.9) women comprise a smaller percentage of the total number of women employed in management, financial, and business occupations than White women (77.7%). Despite possessing advanced educational degrees, skills, and experience, women of color in corporate organizations are often impeded by racial biases, obstacles, and challenges that prevent them from advancing professionally (Tucker & Patrick, 2017). The American Community Survey conducted from

2010-2014 showed that for women of color ages 25-54, only 55.4% of Asian/Pacific Islander women, 23.2% of Black/African American women, 18.3% of Hispanic women, and 16.1% of American Indian women held a bachelor's degree or higher, compared with 33.1% of White/Caucasian women (Tucker & Patrick, 2017). Furthermore, women of color continued to experience significant wage disparities, with Black women earning only 61 cents, Latinas earning 53 cents, and Asian women earning 85 cents per dollar earned by non-Hispanic White men who worked full-time (Tucker & Patrick, 2017).

Research Questions

How do African-American women in managerial leadership roles perceive corporate efforts related to diversity and inclusion while dealing with microaggressive experiences in career advancement?

Sub-research questions:

- What are African American women's perceptions of tools that attempt to facilitate the corporate world's successful and unsuccessful diversity, inclusion, and equity agenda?
What are African American women's perceptions of how their organization's core values & culture facilitate the career progression and empowerment of women of color?

Scope and Significance of the Problem

The study in question is focused on a specific demographic, namely African-American women, and aimed to explore the impact of diversity, equity, and inclusion on their empowerment (Strickland, 2022). By identifying the target demographic and thoroughly analyzing pertinent factors, the study proposes strategic interventions and methodologies to mitigate potential shortcomings in achieving the intended impact. The need for this study is clear, as it is vital to understand the gains in DEI made in the past ten years and to determine

how best to improve adherence to the critical tenets discussed. Ultimately, this research contributes to a better understanding of promoting empowerment among African-American women and supporting their continued progress toward equality and representation.

This is a critical study mainly because of recent diversity, equity, and inclusion developments. Corporations have recently allocated more resources to ensure diversity and inclusion (Lingras et al., 2021). This makes one naturally question how well these resources are being used and their impact in the real world. Hinton & Lambert stated, "Many struggle to measure the effectiveness of their efforts and communicate them to the scientific community" (2022). One may examine the current impact of diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives compared to their effect a decade ago to assess progress and suggest any necessary adjustments that could help address challenges and bolster the successes already achieved. Therefore, investigating the advancements in diversity, equity, and inclusion is imperative (Stevens et al., 2008).

In addition, this project enhances the understanding of the inequality facing African-American women in workplaces, especially concerning promotions and leadership (Yin, 2011). Understanding how each stakeholder contributes to the low representation of African-American women in leadership also leads to recommendations for action (Black Enterprise, 2019). Most importantly, the research recommends enhancing the number and power of African-American women in executive positions in the corporate world. Practicing this can enhance leadership diversity in the corporate world, strengthening the pool of alternatives during decisions (Green, 2019). Moreover, executive positions will improve the motivation of African-American women to work in their respective workplaces. They will enhance their compensation packages, livelihoods, and societies' livelihoods (Black Enterprise, 2019).

Definitions

Diversity - within the concept of DEI and corporate culture, diversity refers to variations in individual differences that cut across many areas ranging from race, such as economic status, culture, and even gender identity (Frye, 2019).

Inclusion - Inclusion refers to a sense of belonging an individual has as a group member, or in this case, a company (Krischler et al., 2019).

Equity - refers to equalization in opportunity and an effort to ensure everyone can access these opportunities equally (Frye, 2019).

Empowerment - becoming more confident or assertive, especially in controlling or claiming one's life (Drane, 2022).

Critical Race Theory (CRT) – focuses theoretical attention on race and how racism is deeply embedded in the framework of American Society (Parker & Lynn, 2002)

Code-switching - adjusting one's style of speech, appearance, behavior, and expression in ways that will optimize the comfort of others in exchange for fair treatment, quality service, and employment opportunities (McCluney et al., 2019).

Concrete Ceiling - According to Byrd (2009), minority women face various barriers that hinder their progress in the workplace. These barriers must be addressed to ensure equal opportunities for everyone (Drane, 2022).

Marginalized - Individuals or communities are those who are often pushed to the fringes of society, facing discrimination, exclusion, and limited access to resources and opportunities. This can be due to race, ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, or other forms of inequality.

Microaggression - The term microaggressions refers to various forms of insults, both

verbal and nonverbal, that are directed towards individuals belonging to marginalized communities, especially people of color (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). These forms of aggression can be conscious or unconscious, subtle or visual (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012).

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

Summary

The study focused on the population served and examined the socioeconomic impacts and personal and professional repercussions of being a woman of color in the workplace. Women of color often face biases related to their appearance, authority, mannerisms, personalities, and sexism, among other factors. They may feel undervalued, disrespected, and singled out, and they must outperform their peers to gain recognition, acceptance, or notice for their work ethics and accomplishments (Hill et al., 2016; Hollis, 2022). Established and long-standing deterrents such as pay inequities, inaccessibility, and invisibility in leadership positions may lead to health and well-being issues, ultimately affecting work performance and personal growth.

The findings of this study helped clarify the concept of the "concrete ceiling" and how it affects women of color in or aspiring to leadership positions in the workplace through their lived experiences (Smith, 2011). Chapter 2 presents the literature review that supports the primary research question and the conceptual framework, which addresses the social and economic

impacts of the concrete ceiling on women of color in the workplace. It offers strategies and suggestions for corporate managers to mitigate adverse effects (Hill et al., 2016; Hollis, 2022).

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction and Purpose

The empowerment of women of color has been a concern for numerous decades. It is closely tied to the concepts of second-wave feminism and even the civil rights movement (Brown et al., 2017; Strickland, 2022). In both movements, women's rights moved forward steadily along with other rights. The movements evolved to cater to different groups, including women. For example, when one examines feminist literature from previous decades, one can see that initially, feminists were focused on the equality of Caucasian women. In theory, feminism advocated for every woman, but the White female was prioritized over the rest. As noted by Brown et al. (2017), "the movement has been accused of focusing largely on the concerns of Caucasian women and generally avoiding the concerns of African American women" (p. 179). As progress was made, the concern of Black women being at the lowest rung of the ladder began to receive more attention (Strickland, 2022).

However, there is a weakness in tracking the impact of the various DEI initiatives on the progress of Black women (Hinton & Lambert, 2022). This study aimed to examine the previous literature to determine previous initiatives, their impacts, and the various gaps they may have had. The paper expressly focuses on exploring the impact of recent initiatives geared toward promoting diversity, inclusion, and equity for women of color. Specifically, it examined the extent to which these initiatives have contributed to the empowerment of women of color and proposes ways to build on the positive aspects of such impact. In doing so, this study may contribute to the literature that tracks the effects of diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives on African American women and their effectiveness.

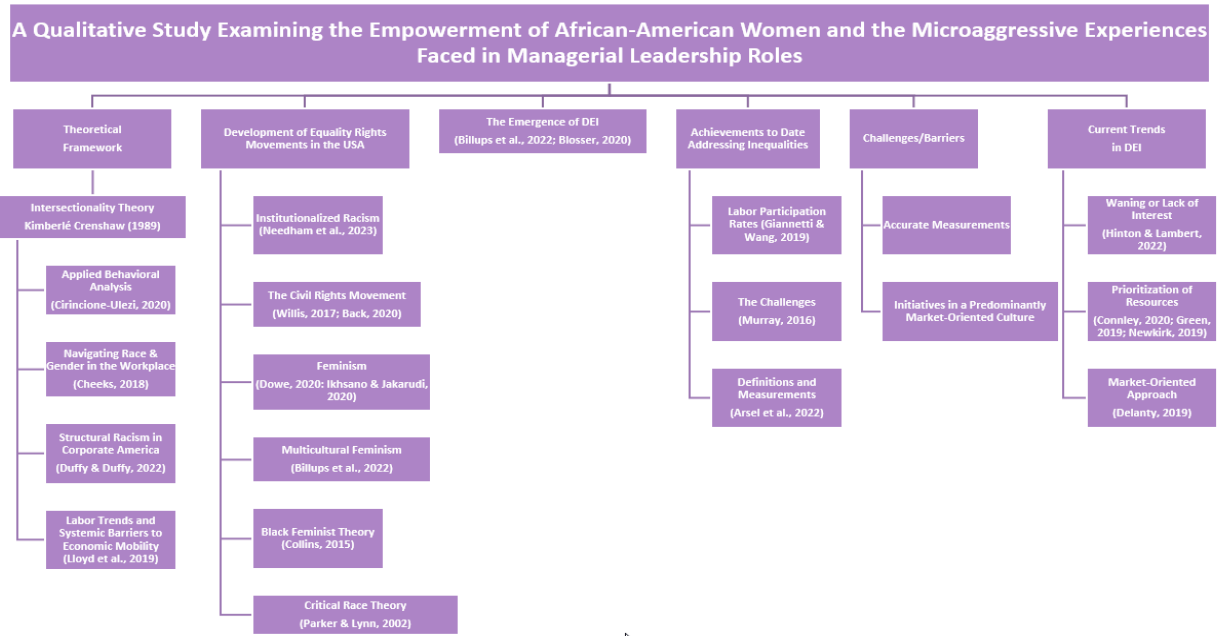
When one studies literature regarding African-American women in the workplace, it is often clear that they belong to an underrepresented group (Hinton & Lambert, 2022). This underrepresentation tends to affect both low- and high-level positions in the corporate environment. However, they are more represented at the lower levels (Hinton & Lambert, 2022). This means that if an individual walked into an organization, the probability that they would find Black individuals at any level in large numbers is smaller than when compared to the presence of White people at the same levels. This disparity is more severe when one moves up the management scale. Various articles have been analyzed to demonstrate this concept and its severity, demonstrating a need for action to address this genuine problem in corporate America (Hinton & Lambert, 2022).

Search Description

A literature review was conducted on articles and databases with titles and abstracts that addressed women of color and concrete ceilings. The literature was organized with a primary or secondary purpose, considering the theoretical or conceptual framework (Cronin et al., 2008). Descriptive articles and databases discussed theories, concepts, studies, prior and current research, surveys, and topics addressing disparities in women's experiences in the workplace, especially women of color. After reviewing approximately 75 articles, the concurrent theme emerged as the need to diversify leadership positions in corporate America for women of color. The recommendations provide corporate management with ways to mitigate or eliminate challenges blocking career access to upper managerial levels for women of color. A review of current literature on articles and titles that addressed women of color, workplace discrimination, and concrete ceilings provided evidence of significant barriers and inequities for women of color (Cronin et al., 2008).

Figure 1

Literature Map



Theoretical Framework

Diversity is a prominent topic in various spheres, including politics, law, finance, education, and international affairs. Diversity in the workplace encompasses a wide range of information, values, beliefs, and theories. Intersectionality theory suggests that gender inequality in leadership positions is not only the result of gender discrimination but also a combination of various societal and psychological barriers that intersect with other social identities such as race, class, and sexual orientation, making it even harder for women with marginalized identities to advance in their careers (Hollis, 2022). These barriers include gender stereotypes, discrimination, a lack of role models, biases in evaluation and selection processes, and the double bind of being seen as too assertive or not assertive enough. The theory suggests that to promote gender equality in leadership, we must address these barriers at both the individual and systemic levels. Studies

on inclusive leadership are crucial in understanding the behaviors and factors contributing to the uniqueness and belongingness within workgroups (Randel et al., 2018).

Intersectionality Theory

The conceptual framework for this study was the interconnection between race, gender, and sexism faced by women of color in the workplace and intersectionality (Hankivsky & Jordan-Zachery, 2019; Hollis, 2022; Wills, 2017). Intersectionality is a controversial term coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw that expresses the problems immigrant women of color face (Crenshaw, 1989). Crenshaw's (1989) concept of intersectionality, originally a somewhat academic term, has become one of the most critical topics in national conversations about racial justice, identity politics, and policing. It has also played a significant role in shaping legal discussions. Crenshaw stated, "There have always been people, from the beginning of the civil rights movement, who had denounced the creation of equality rights on the grounds that it takes something away from them" (Hollis, 2022, p. 24).

Intersectionality has become one of the most prominent topics in national conversations about racial justice, identity politics, and policing (Wills, 2017). It has also played a vital role in shaping legal discussions. According to Wills (2017), intersectionality highlights how political and legal mechanisms create barriers for individuals of multiple minority identities. In particular, women of color experience discrimination in a multi-dimensional way that overlaps in several areas. "Intersectionality was a prism to bring to light dynamics within discrimination law that weren't being appreciated by the courts," Crenshaw said. "In particular, courts seem to think that race discrimination was what happened to all Black people across gender and sex discrimination was what happened to all women, and if that is your framework, of course, what happens to Black women and other women of color is going to be difficult to see" (Wills, 2017, p. 133).

Corporate leaders and managers are responsible for understanding the role, importance, and juxtaposition of intersectionality and diversity, especially concerning how and why women of color perceive and describe their experiences in and out of the workplace. The use of intersectionality in research has informed the researcher's understanding of how various components form a concrete social and economic consequence barrier for women of color in the workplace (Hankivsky & Jordan-Zachery, 2019; Hollis, 2022). Therefore, companies and organizations must integrate intersectionality into their diversity and inclusion strategies to ensure that the experiences of women of color are considered. By doing so, they can create more inclusive environments and promote equality across all levels of their organization. The effects of oppression can be felt throughout society, as norms and systems are used to treat and control individuals unfairly. Intersectionality is an important concept that recognizes the interconnectedness of these oppressive forces and highlights their complexity (Dowe, 2020). It emphasizes that these forces cannot be reduced to a single aspect of identity but are interdependent and shape each other. By adopting an intersectional approach, we can better understand and combat prejudice and discrimination (Dowe, 2020). This involves recognizing and confronting how different forms of oppression intersect and compound to create unique experiences for marginalized individuals and communities. Ultimately, acknowledging and comprehending intersectionality is essential in working towards a more just and equitable society (Dowe, 2020).

Review of Research Literature

As women have risen to leadership positions, the barriers to ensuring stability and retaining upper-level leadership have become increasingly complex (Davis & Maldonado, 2015). The historical underrepresentation of African American women in leadership has been slowly

evolving. Some contributing factors hindering the advancement of African American women in an organization are workplace practices reinforced by societal standards, further contributing to the glass ceiling (Beckwith et al., 2016). The glass ceiling refers to the barriers to advancement in a profession that minorities, especially African American women, struggle to overcome (Ganguly, Rao & Dutta, 2017). These barriers often prevent African American women from existing in an organization and achieving managerial success.

Black Women and Barriers to Leadership in ABA

Cirincione-Ulezi (2020) noted that the number of African-American women credentialed to serve as Applied Behavior Analysts (ABA) has increased over time. She admits there has been an improvement in the number of African-American women in the position (Cirincione-Ulezi, 2020). The anecdotal evidence is substantiated by Cirincione-Ulezi's exploration of the B. F. Skinner Lecture Series from 2017 to 2019. This series featured esteemed speakers recognized as prominent figures in the field of ABA on a global scale. Over the course of the ABAI convention during this period, a total of 52 speakers were invited to present at the B. F. Skinner Lecture Series.

The demographic analysis of 52 individuals who were invited as speakers revealed a striking imbalance, with 92% being White (67% male and 27% female), less than 1% being Asian females, and less than 1% being Latino females. Notably, no Black male or female speakers were invited for the B. F. Skinner Lecture Series at the ABAI's annual national convention between 2017 and 2019. Despite the methodological limitations, these findings strongly indicate a lack of representation of professionals of color, especially Black women, at leadership levels within the ABA field.

Regardless of this gradual increase of African-American women in the area of behavior analysis, Cirincione-Ulezi (2020) noted that according to the 2019 Bureau of Labor Statistics, “people of color are still progressing to leadership at a disproportionately lower rate than White counterparts in the professional labor force” (p. 719). While African American women’s participation rates in the labor force have increased compared to previous decades, they are still far from participating at rates equal to or similar to those of White women. According to Cirincione-Ulezi's (2020) qualitative study, there were instances where African-American women were the sole representatives of their demographic within a particular department or job position.

This made them stand out and was counterproductive to their inclusion. In such cases, these individuals felt odd and sometimes even stressed out (Cirincione-Ulezi, 2020). The inclusion was worsened further by the fact that many of these women face bias and subtle microaggressions at the same workplace that they can often do very little about with no recourse. It is often observed that individuals who hold high positions frequently feel isolated and unsupported due to the lack of role models and mentors in their professional circle. This can make it difficult for them to feel integrated into their work environment. Therefore, as can already be seen, it is indeed a challenge for an African-American woman to be well-integrated into the corporate atmosphere in America. These individuals are incorporated disproportionately slower, and even when included, they fail to be well-integrated and remain isolated (Cirincione-Ulezi, 2020).

How Black Women Describe Navigating Race and Gender in the Workplace

The findings of Cirincione-Ulezi (2020) are also echoed by Maura Cheeks (2018) in her phonological study of 15 women of color, which sought to establish how they described their

lived experiences at the workplace while navigating the constructs of gender and race. In her study, Cirincione-Ulezi notes one thing that cuts across the American corporate sphere and the classes she was attending. Both of these environments had very few African-American women. She then participated in part-time Master of Business Administration (MBA) classes. Therefore, Cirincione-Ulezi begins the article by explicitly noticing that during her study, African-American women were underrepresented in education courses that prepare individuals for managerial tasks. This is reflected in the corporate environment because when very few individuals are available in educational programs that prepare people for administrative tasks, one can see how the managerial posts in the corporate American environment would also reflect the same (Cheeks, 2018; Cirincione-Ulezi, 2020). On this point, Cheeks' (2018) findings align with those of Cirincione-Ulezi (2020) in the previous article (Cheeks, 2018; Cirincione-Ulezi, 2020).

Another area that Cheeks (2018) analyzed was what impedes African-American women in the workplace. Like Cirincione-Ulezi (2020), Cheeks (2018) realized these women were judged based on their work and other intangible things (Eatough & Smith, 2017; Cirincione-Ulezi, 2020). She noticed that one thing unique to Black women at work is that they must take on two or more personas. Women of color must practice code-switching (Cheeks, 2018) to fit in their workplaces, mainly because they find it challenging to retain their identity and exist in the workplace, as they have to change behavior and mannerisms to align with perceived workplace expectations.

In her work, Cheeks (2018) observed that, in line with Cirincione-Ulezi's findings, African-American women often encounter a situation in the workplace where White women occupy the majority of managerial positions (Cheeks, 2018; Cirincione-Ulezi, 2020). African Americans are so underrepresented that those fortunate enough to have mentors are advised to

‘dim the light’ so as not to outshine their White counterparts (Cheeks, 2018). This creates a very stressful environment in the workplace that can discourage African-American women (Cheeks, 2018).

Structural Racism and Black Women’s Employment in the U.S. Health Care Sector

Dill and Duffy (2022) examined the phenomenological impact of structural racism on Black populations, Indigenous populations, and populations of people of color, in addition to other concepts previously discussed in relevant literature. While the other studies looked at racism superficially, a study by suggestion adds the dimension of structural racism. This is a kind of racism ingrained in the corporate environment and the country in general, and it tends to be systemic (Dill & Duffy, 2022). This means that an African-American individual would likely find it hard to thrive in the workplace, not just because that specific employer or organization is racist, but because the organization or employer is part of a system that reinforces racism in overt and subtle ways (Dill & Duffy, 2022).

The 2019 American Community Survey ($n = 1,127,595$) indicated that African-American women are systematically assigned lower-level positions in society, especially in the healthcare industry, where they have to deal with low-paying and potentially dangerous jobs (Dill & Duffy, 2022). For a clear context, the authors found that about 23% of Black women were employed in these poor-paying and high-risk jobs (Dill & Duffy, 2022, p. 265). It is also found that Black women “have the highest probability of working in the long-term care sector (37%)” (Dill & Duffy, 2022, p. 265). These are not highly paying jobs similar to nursing jobs, where 42% of African-American women are employed (Dill & Duffy, 2022, p. 265).

The study conducted on the participation of African-American women in the workforce highlights a significant gap that exists in their representation. This finding is consistent with

other studies that have already been conducted on the topic. The study identifies structural racism and sexism as the primary factors that intersect to create a disadvantage for these women. The impact of these structural issues is significant, leading to a need for more access to opportunities and resources that are necessary to succeed in the workforce. This study underscores the need for policies and interventions that address these intersecting issues and promote equity in the workplace (Dill & Duffy, 2022).

Analysis of Black Women’s Historical Labor Trends and Systemic Barriers to Economic Mobility

In the same vein, the article by Lloyd et al. (2019) does good work in summarizing and pointing out the issues faced in the previous articles (Lloyd et al., 2019). For example, The Women’s Fund of the Greater Cincinnati Foundation notes that in 2018, the median annual earnings of African-American women were 36% lower than those in the industry for other individuals and 42% lower than “the self-sufficiency standard” (Lloyd et al., 2019). The authors attribute this discrepancy to numerous factors, including historical racism and sexism (Lloyd et al., 2019).

The authors note that historically, African-American women have been relegated to menial jobs, similar to the findings of the previous article by Dill and Duffy (2022). Since they are relegated to these jobs, their pay tends to match the poor state of their employment. This then results in a situation whereby these women are relegated to poor employment, and these jobs are assigned inferior pay. The author paralleled this state of African-American women and their ancestors when slavery was acceptable in American society. They noted that while slavery ended, the stereotypes from that era that influenced how society viewed African-American women never truly ended. This, they argue, is one of the reasons that African-American women

are treated so poorly and why they have been discriminated against even at their place of employment. These factors have resulted in a situation whereby these women have been discriminated against and relegated to jobs that pay poorly and are very demanding and necessary for the sustenance of society (Dill & Duffy, 2022).

Study Highlights Barriers Black Women Face in Corporate America

The study conducted by Candid in 2020 highlights the challenges faced by African-American women in the corporate sector. According to research, the number of Black women who attain management positions is significantly lower than that of men, with only 58% of Black women promoted for every 100 men (Candid, 2020). Interestingly, Black women apply for promotions just as often as their peers. Similarly, regarding hiring for management roles, only 64 Black women are employed for every 100 men (Candid, 2020). This lack of representation in leadership positions exacerbates the issue of the underrepresentation of Black women in higher positions.

According to Lloyd et al. (2019), African-American women encounter significant barriers to career advancement, as found by the Women's Fund of the Greater Cincinnati Foundation. The study further notes that African-American women face additional challenges when compared to men and other minority groups, like Latinas (Candid, 2020). These findings demonstrate the impact of systemic discrimination on women of color and provide context for the results of previous studies. The fact that African-American women face the most severe societal, economic, and political pressures highlights the urgent need to prioritize their issues and provide them with the necessary support and resources to overcome the obstacles they face. These findings further underscore the critical need to develop initiatives and policies aimed at

addressing the systemic discrimination that has impeded this group from achieving its full potential.

Microaggression

Microaggressions refer to the subtle, indirect, and often unintentional forms of discrimination or prejudice that people belonging to marginalized groups experience in their daily lives. They are defined as "brief and commonplace verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative slights and insults toward people from marginalized groups" (Sue et al., 2008, p. 271). Microaggressions can take many forms, such as microassaults (verbal or nonverbal actions meant to hurt or harm), microinsults (subtle put-downs or invalidations), and microinvalidations (actions that invalidate or negate the experiences of marginalized individuals) (Sue et al., 2008).

Despite the extensive literature on prejudice and discrimination and their ramifications, these issues persist in both organizations and larger societies (Carnahan & McFarland, 2007). Subtle forms of prejudice have infiltrated organizations and are challenging to detect and manage effectively (Dovidio & Gaertner, 2000). Additionally, while research on microaggressive prejudice has predominantly focused on minority racial groups (Sue et al., 2008) and women (Eagly & Carli, 2007), other protected groups have received scant attention. Therefore, further research is imperative to advance an inclusive and equitable environment for all individuals and groups.

The concept of microaggressions was initially conceptualized in the late 1960s by Dr. Chester Pierce, who was often regarded as the father of microaggressions (Perez Huber & Solorzano, 2015; Pierce, 1969). Dr. Pierce defined microaggressions as subtle and usually unconscious forms of verbal or nonverbal assault directed at individuals from marginalized

groups, such as African Americans. Through these daily interactions, microaggressions serve as a systematic approach to suppress and marginalize these individuals, rendering them "invisible" and unworthy (Pierce et al., 1977).

Over four decades, Dr. Pierce (1977) meticulously developed and refined the concept of racial microaggressions, aiming to provide society with a better understanding of how these negative daily experiences constitute a form of everyday racism encountered by people of color or minorities (Perez Huber & Solorzano, 2015). By identifying and analyzing microaggressions, Dr. Pierce's work underscores the insidious nature of everyday racism and the necessity for society to combat it actively.

In recent years, scholars have explored Pierce's (1977) theory on racial microaggressions and their effects on individuals of color. Omi and Winant (1994) sought to investigate how racial microaggressions occur during everyday interactions, often concealed. They aimed to explore the existence of "natural" and "common sense" qualities related to racial etiquette, which are a set of interpretive codes and racial meanings shaping individuals' daily interactions. These codes are influenced by the perception of race in a comprehensive racial society, determining how individuals present themselves (Lyman & Douglass, 1973). These experiences are often challenging to detect and can exacerbate the gap between racial realities in America.

Further research on microaggressions and their impact on various marginalized groups is essential for creating a more inclusive and equitable society (Solorzano et al., 2000). Organizations and larger societies can work towards environments that promote fairness and respect for all individuals by understanding and addressing subtle forms of prejudice (Solorzano et al., 2000). By acknowledging and addressing microaggressions, individuals, and organizations can work towards creating a more inclusive society that values diversity and equity for all.

Major Earnings and Occupational Mobility Discovered in The Literature

Historical literature and research have identified significant racial disparities among women concerning earnings and occupational mobility (Nkomo & Cox, 1999). However, there has been very little empirical evidence on the perceptions of women of color regarding work experiences and job quality. A national study conducted by Mays et al. (1996) reported on the perceptions of Black women regarding employment, health issues, and job opportunities. The literature then reveals that women and Black people have faced numerous challenges, such as job stress, unequal treatment, limited advancement opportunities, and restricted access to training and personal development (Mays et al., 1996).

As early as 1998, researchers have reported on how restricted access to influential networks and individuals has impacted the career advancement opportunities of women of color (Hollis, 2022; Mehra et al., 2017). The qualitative study by Mehra et al. (2017) found that women of color ($n = 294$) had limited access to influential networks and individuals because of systemic biases, which led to restricted career advancement opportunities (Mehra et al., 2017).

Despite the progress that has been made in recent years, women of color still face significant challenges in the workplace. These challenges include the lack of access to influential networks and individuals, as well as limited career advancement opportunities. According to a study by Catalyst (2019), women of color are underrepresented in leadership positions and, on average, earn less than their male and White female counterparts. This highlights the ongoing need for organizations to address issues of systemic bias and provide equal opportunities for all employees, regardless of race or gender (Catalyst, 2019).

Studies and research have consistently shown that women of color often encounter significant obstacles and biases in the workplace. These challenges can include a lack of access

to influential networks and individuals, limited opportunities for career advancement, and inequitable treatment compared to their counterparts. It is imperative that organizations take proactive steps to address these issues and create a more equitable and inclusive workplace for all employees, regardless of their gender or race. By doing so, organizations can promote a culture of fairness and equal opportunities, leading to higher levels of employee engagement, productivity, and retention (Hollis, 2022).

Institutionalized Racism

The fundamental values of freedom and individual rights have been quintessential to American society. Regrettably, throughout the history of the United States, equality of freedoms has not been extended to all citizens. Specifically, African Americans were subjected to discrimination and prejudice in the aftermath of the Civil War, as they were deprived of access to education, job opportunities, and proper housing (Needham et al., 2023). Similarly, women were also denied equal rights, notably the right to vote, a fundamental aspect of civic participation. The struggle for civil rights has been a long-standing issue in American history, and several social movements have been initiated to address these injustices.

One theoretical framework that helps explain these injustices' persistence is institutionalized racism (Needham et al., 2023). This concept refers to the ways in which racism and discrimination are embedded within society's structures and systems, such as the criminal justice system, education system, and housing policies. Institutionalized racism perpetuates inequality and injustice, even if individual actors within those systems do not intend to discriminate (Needham et al., 2023).

Renowned leaders such as Susan B. Anthony and Martin Luther King Jr. played a crucial role in advocating for the rights of disenfranchised groups and promoting the values of equality

and justice. However, despite their efforts, institutionalized racism remains a pervasive issue in American society (Needham et al., 2023). It is essential for individuals and institutions to recognize and actively work to dismantle these systems of oppression to create a truly just and equitable society for all (Needham et al., 2023).

The Civil Rights Movement

Throughout history, Black women have been at the forefront of the fight for equality and representation in society. The civil rights movement was a turning point for the Black community, and women such as Rosa Parks and Ella Baker played significant roles in the struggle for equal rights and integration into society (Wills, 2017).

During the civil rights movement, African Americans, both men and women, were fighting for their rights to be recognized as full members of society, rejecting segregationist agendas and demanding equal participation. Diversity, equity, and inclusion still needed to be considered as they are concepts of current society. Still, during the civil rights movement, the struggle for empowerment and representation had already begun.

Significant strides were made during the civil rights movement to abolish segregation and discrimination against various groups, including Black women. Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 explicitly prohibited discrimination based on gender, sex, and race (Back, 2020). This development slowly evolved to help empower women of color and ensure they were not overlooked in the fight for equality.

However, despite these legal protections, Black women still face significant challenges in society today. They continue to experience discrimination in various forms, including employment, healthcare, and education (National Women's Law Center, 2021). The struggle for diversity, equity, and inclusion is ongoing, and it is essential to acknowledge the significant

contributions of Black women in this ongoing struggle. Their efforts have paved the way for progress and have helped create a more inclusive society for future generations (Back, 2020). Black women have played a crucial role in the fight for equality and representation in society throughout history, and their contributions should not be overlooked. While progress has been made, there is still much work to be done to create a truly equitable and inclusive society.

Feminism

Throughout history, feminist rights movements have fought for the empowerment of women of color, similar to the civil rights movement. Initially, the feminist movement prioritized the rights of White women but eventually expanded its focus to include women across the societal spectrum. Although the movement's early efforts primarily benefited White women, women of color also helped to some extent (Ikhsano & Jakarudi, 2020). One example is the feminist fight for inclusion within the working environment. While White women were initially the primary focus, Black women also benefited somewhat (Dowe, 2020). For instance, when NASA experienced a shortage of engineers, they first hired White female workers. When this pool ran out, they turned to Black female workers (Ikhsano & Jakarudi, 2020).

This shows that although the feminist movement had flaws, it progressed in advancing women's rights across racial lines. As the movement evolved, it became more inclusive and recognized the intersectionality of women's experiences. Today, the feminist rights movement continues to grow and address new challenges facing women, including the gender pay gap, domestic violence, and the lack of women in leadership positions. The movement has made significant progress over the years. However, there is still much progress to be made to achieve true gender equality, recognizing the importance of empowering all women, regardless of race or ethnicity (Ikhsano & Jakarudi, 2020).

Multicultural Feminism

Feminist movements moved away from the segregationist approach to fighting for women's rights and began viewing marginalized women of color in the same light as White women (Billups et al., 2022). This is a significant step in helping Black women advance to equal participation in the workforce. As these feminist activists embraced the concept of fighting for marginalized women, they fought just as hard for White women. The government has acknowledged the necessity of addressing the specific requirements of Black women and taking appropriate action to assist them in catching up with other members of society. The government did this by setting up departments and offices whose specific role was to protect these minority groups and punish corporations that discriminated against them. Feminist movements have evolved from a segregationist approach to a more intersectional approach to fighting for women's rights.

As feminist activists caught on with the concept of fighting for marginalized women, they fought just as hard for White women. The government also recognized the need to act upon the unique needs of Black women and respond to them so that they could be boosted and catch up with other members of society. To address the issue, the government set up departments and offices whose specific role was to watch out for these minority groups and punish corporations that picked on or discriminated against them (Billups et al., 2022).

For instance, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) was established in the United States in 1965 to address workplace discrimination against women, including Black women (Kalev et al., 2006). The EEOC is responsible for enforcing federal laws that make it illegal to discriminate against a job applicant or an employee based on their race, color, religion, sex (including pregnancy, gender identity, and sexual orientation), national origin, age (40 or

older), disability, or genetic information (Kalev et al., 2006). Therefore, the government's efforts to address the unique needs of marginalized women, including Black women, have been critical in promoting equal participation in the workforce. With the support of feminist movements and government initiatives, Black women have been able to break barriers and achieve significant career milestones (Kalev et al., 2006).

Black Feminist Theory

Black Feminist Theory (BFT) was developed to address Black American women's needs during racial oppression in the Women's Movement and sexual oppression in the Black Liberation Movement (Collins, 2015). It was observed that Blacks were often equated with Black men, and women were equated with White women, leading to Black women being a double minority. Women faced discrimination based on race and gender (Hooks, 1990).

BFT aimed to create a theory that accounted for the interconnectedness of race, gender, and class in the lives of Black women and to combat discriminatory practices based on racism, sexism, and classism (Collins, 2015, p.137). Collins (2015) also emphasized that the mere presence of Black women in White-dominated spaces does not guarantee them power, voice, or equal access to knowledge-making opportunities.

BFT was characterized by certain ideologies from justice movements for Blacks and women (Brown et al., 2017). The civil rights movement, primarily led by men, worked to secure Black rights as a racial minority, often neglecting the need for change among women within the same movement (Brown et al., 2017). Federal legislation mandated equal employment opportunities in various sectors, including higher education and businesses, leading to the gradual increase of Black people within these organizations (Gappa & Uehling, 1979).

BFT can guide qualitative research to assess Black women's challenges in advancing to senior-level leadership positions. Collins (2015) notes that BFT considers all Black women, including Afro-Caribbean, Nigerian American, Black British, Afro-Brazilian, and those who identify as Black in conjunction with other racial identifications. BFT is a critical intellectual goal that seeks to empower Black women and challenge oppressive structures (Collins, 2015).

Black feminist theory, as a specialized thought, reflects the thematic content of Black women's experiences. However, due to Black American women having to struggle against White male interpretations of the world to express a self-defined standpoint, Black feminist thought can be seen as subjugated knowledge (Collins, 2015). According to Taylor (1998), Black women made numerous efforts to develop strategies for power and liberation during the civil rights movement. However, they often faced isolation from both Black male and White female activists, which resulted in their silencing.

Maria Stewart, a renowned Black woman, is widely recognized as one of the pioneers of Black feminism. Stewart urged women to refuse the dominant, domestic images and thoughts of Black women; she understood the intersectional position of Black women in America and blamed racism, classism, and sexism as the main culprits of their oppression (Soogrim, 2015). Stewart and Richardson (1987) described Stewart as a champion of Black women's relationships with one another by providing a community for Black women's activism and self-determination. Stewart was an activist for Black women's rights and took the initiative to ensure that equality for Black women would be possible. Stewart knew that stereotypical events and issues would diminish by providing the same respect to Black women as White men and White women (Bailey, 2008). As described by literature, Black feminism states it is a source of strength and

opportunity for Black women who could not find their voices and experiences in others' scholarship (Hooks, 1990).

A robust effort to combat discrimination based on race, gender, and class necessitates a resolute push for the empowerment and recognition of Black women. Black feminism serves as a crucial tool in dismantling the harmful stereotypes that persistently surround Black women and perpetuate social injustices as an accepted part of our daily lives. The significance of this approach has been acknowledged by numerous scholars, such as Acuff (2018), Benard (2016), Collins (2009, 1996), and Taylor (2016).

Critical Race Theory

Racism has significantly shaped the U.S. legal system and influenced people's perspectives on the law, racial categories, and privilege (Harris, 2019). Critical race theory (CRT) aims to achieve three primary objectives identified by Parker and Lynn (2002). The first goal is to present stories of discrimination from the viewpoint of people of color, which can include qualitative case studies, descriptions, and interviews. These accounts can then be used to build a case against racially biased officials or discriminatory practices. Counterstories by people of color can help challenge dominant discourses that serve to suppress marginalized communities and shatter the complacency that often accompanies White privilege, which is advanced by "majoritarian" master narratives (Perez Huber & Solorzano, 2015).

The second goal of CRT is to eradicate racial subjugation while recognizing race as a social construct (Parker & Lynn, 2002). According to this perspective, race is not a fixed term but somewhat fluid and continually shaped by political pressures and individual lived experiences. Finally, the third goal of CRT is to address the inequities experienced by individuals across various areas of difference, including gender and class. As Parker and Lynn (2002) stated,

"In the case of Black women, race does not exist outside of gender, and gender does not exist outside of race" (p. 12). When using CRT methodology in research, the researcher must foreground race and racism in all aspects of the research process, challenge traditional research paradigms, texts, and theories used to explain the experiences of people of color and offer transformative solutions to racial and gender and class subordination in societal and institutional structures (Parker & Lynn, 2002).

To understand women's experiences in leadership through an African American/Black lens, critical race theory (CRT) addresses the concerns of racism and racial discrimination (Bell, 1995). Originally founded as a response to a delayed civil rights movement in the United States, this theory targeted detrimental laws by exposing racial inequities supported by U.S. policy (Tate, 1997). CRT provides an examination of how entrenched racism is in the fabric of the culture of people of color in the United States (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Focusing on the socially constructed and broad nature of race, CRT considers racism constant and regular in U.S. society. CRT also provides a rich context of African American/Black women's leadership experiences through the lens of race and racism as integral to all aspects of the research process (Creswell & Poth, 2023; Hartman, 2018).

In the exploration of the impact of tokenism, microaggressions, and targeted racism on the career pipeline of African American/Black women in organizations, CRT provides a critical perspective on how they are affected by the causes, consequences, and manifestations of race, racism, and inequality in the workplace (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Hartman, 2018). The literature on CRT guides how African American/Black women can break through racism and discrimination barriers by sharing the counter-stories to the stereotypes that keep them marginalized and disenfranchised (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Hartman, 2018; Steele, 2010).

In an examination of the intersectionality of race and gender, CRT provides the researcher with additional context and approaches to challenge bias, privilege, and positionality in the analytical process of capturing and addressing the lived experiences of the participants in the study (Creswell & Poth, 2023; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Conducting a qualitative research study with semi-structured interviews aligns with CRT by creating the opportunity for African American/Black women to share their lived experiences of tokenism, microaggressions, and racism in the workplace that impact their ability to make progress along their career trajectory (Creswell & Poth, 2023).

The Emergence of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

Despite the progress made in the past, Black women continue to face significant disadvantages compared to other members of society (Hunt et al., 2020). This is mainly because interventions aimed at helping them were implemented after other groups had already made significant strides, leaving Black women to play catch-up. As a result, Black women are left to benefit from compounded wealth and support that other groups have enjoyed before them (Hunt et al., 2020). To help bridge this gap, companies began examining the DEI concept. The main aim of the diversity, equity, and inclusion approach was to help leapfrog these women ahead so that they could catch up with the rest of society regarding representation in pertinent areas such as the corporate sector. Thus, diversity, equity, and inclusion were born as a framework to help marginalized groups (Hunt et al., 2020).

The DEI movement in the United States has a long history, starting in the 1960s with the civil rights movement. It has expanded to include a wide range of identities, such as gender, sexual orientation, religion, and country of origin. Initially, the focus was on tolerance and integrating diverse identities in workplaces, schools, and communities. Later, from the mid-

1970s to the 1990s, the movement shifted its focus to the black feminist movement, multiculturalism, and recognizing the achievements of various racial and ethnic minorities (Billups et al., 2022; Blosser, 2019). Therefore, while its tenets can be observed in the two movements mentioned above, emphasis on it as a framework of its own has only been observed in the American corporate culture in the past few years (Billups et al., 2022; Blosser, 2019). Therefore, while feminist movements may still exist and the fight for civil rights is still ongoing, in the present arena of issues, there is now a distinct DEI movement that can advocate for issues in its own right.

The DEI movement has heavily focused on empowering African-American women in its current form. This is also why scholars have found it significant to study this specific group and determine its progress away from oppression and into emancipation. Ideally, the movement focuses on all women of color, regardless of their ethnicity, but it must be noted that its central focus is African-American women (Billups et al., 2022; Blosser, 2019). When one examines the literature on diversity, equity, and inclusion, such as that by Billups et al. (2022) and Blosser (2019), it is clear that the main drivers and the main agenda pertain to African Americans (Billups et al., 2022; Blosser, 2019).

Under this framework, the activists advocate for making the corporate environment as varied as possible to include African-American women. Not only are they to be included, but it is also to be done so that they can compete with the other privileged members of society on an equal footing (Billups et al., 2022; Blosser, 2019). There is an emphasis on the equal footing of these women so that they can compete favorably without being impeded by issues unique to them, such as racism and poor backgrounds. Therefore, in its current form, it aims to equalize the playing field for African American women and other minority groups so that they can participate

in the corporate sector and other areas of society as equally as others do (Billups et al., 2022; Blosser, 2019).

Progress Addressing Inequalities

From the evolution of the fight for women's rights in the 1960s, during the civil rights movement, to date, multiple things have been achieved. Over the years, there has been an increase in the number of women in the workforce, which is steadily rising, as Behrman and Gonalons-Pons (2020) noted. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, in 2010, only 1.9% of management positions were held by African American women, but by 2020, that number had increased to 3.8%. However, explicitly concerning the recent diversity, equity, and inclusion framework, one of the most significant achievements is that awareness has been brought to the plight of minority groups. With prior movements, women were lumped into one group and viewed with such a lens. This meant that the most visible groups, such as White women, enjoyed more attention than others (Behrman & Gonalons-Pons, 2020).

This can be seen in statistics that pertain to these groups with White women, but their oppression in the corporate environment is increasing much faster than that of Black women. However, the diversity, equity, and inclusion approach has refocused attention on minority groups and brought their unique experiences to light (Behrman & Gonalons-Pons, 2020). For example, when people are at the workplace, they are forced to be sensitive to the plight of minority groups rather than just assuming everyone is equal and facing similar challenges. For the first time, workplaces have gone out of their way to try and understand the challenges that minority groups face and accommodate them despite the obstacles. Companies such as Microsoft (McIntyre, 2021) and even Amazon (Amazon.com, 2023) have treated these individuals as protected classes and harshly punished those who may seek to intimidate them, discriminate

against them, or otherwise demean them. This indicates that the matter has come to the forefront, and these women have been prioritized within the corporate environment (Behrman & Gonalons-Pons, 2020).

Labor Participation Rates

In recent years, the labor participation rates of women of color, particularly Black women, have significantly improved, increasing by 1.9% since 2010. According to Giannetti and Wang (2019), this achievement can be attributed to the explicit push from leading companies, including Apple, Amazon, and Microsoft, to increase diversity in their workforce. These companies have taken several measures to promote diversity, equity, and inclusion in their hiring practices, such as actively recruiting and hiring women of color and other minority groups for key positions (Giannetti & Wang, 2019).

As reported by Giannetti and Wang (2019), the number of minority groups participating in the workforce has steadily increased at these companies and in society. This increase has not just been limited to lower-level jobs but has also been observed in higher-level positions. By hiring diverse candidates for key positions, these companies aim to demonstrate their commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion in their hiring practices. Some companies even have to meet quotas in the hiring process to ensure that diversity and equity are adhered to as much as possible. The positive effect of these measures is that there has been a sharp focus on increasing the participation of women of color and other minority groups in the workforce, which has been steadily achieved and continues to rise over time. These efforts have been welcomed by society and are a step towards a more inclusive and diverse workforce (Giannetti & Wang, 2019).

Overall, leading companies' concerted efforts to increase workforce diversity have resulted in significant progress in labor participation rates among women of color and other minority groups. As such, it is important for companies across industries to continue promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion in their hiring practices to create a more equitable and inclusive society (Giannetti & Wang, 2019).

The Challenges

Organizations that prioritize diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives are more likely to create a welcoming and inclusive environment that values all employees' unique perspectives and experiences. Such initiatives foster employees' sense of belonging and respect, leading to increased engagement, productivity, and innovation. However, despite the growing popularity of DEI initiatives, research has indicated that there are two specific areas where these initiatives face hindrances: accurate measurement and implementation in a predominantly market-oriented culture (Murray, 2016).

Estimating the effectiveness of DEI initiatives can be challenging due to the lack of standardized metrics and the subjective nature of diversity-related outcomes. Many organizations struggle to accurately gauge their DEI efforts' impact and identify areas for improvement. Additionally, implementing DEI initiatives in a predominantly market-oriented culture can take time, as it requires a shift in mindset from focusing solely on profit and competition to valuing diversity and inclusivity as critical drivers of success. This shift can be challenging for organizations accustomed to a more traditional business approach (Rahman et al., 2016; Reynolds-Dobbs et al., 2008).

Despite these challenges, organizations that are committed to DEI can take steps to overcome them. For example, they can establish clear goals and metrics for their DEI initiatives,

regularly assess their progress, and adjust as needed. Additionally, they can foster a culture of inclusivity by offering training and resources to employees, promoting diversity in leadership positions, and creating spaces for employees to share their perspectives and experiences. Ultimately, organizations prioritizing DEI initiatives are more likely to attract and retain top talent and build a culture of innovation and success (Murray, 2016; Rahman et al., 2016; Reynolds-Dobbs et al., 2008).

According to a qualitative ($n = 24$) study by Murray (2016), African-American women face organizational challenges similar to those of their Caucasian female colleagues. However, compared to other racial groups, African-American women encounter even more obstructive challenges when it comes to leadership positions (Rahman et al., 2016). This intersectionality of race and gender identities presents additional roadblocks that fundamentally affect the career advancement of African-American women leaders within organizations (Murray, 2016; Rahman et al., 2016; Reynolds-Dobbs et al., 2008).

Beckwith et al. (2016) argue that the barriers of race and gender affect not only the stereotypes and perceptions of African-American women leaders but also their determination to achieve career success. Without identifying strategies to overcome these barriers, the number of African-American leaders will continue to rise slowly (Beckwith et al., 2016; Rahman et al., 2016). Furthermore, the intersectionality of race and gender can present career barriers for African-American women, which can limit their access to senior leadership positions (Reynolds-Dobbs et al., 2008).

In conclusion, organizations must recognize and address the unique challenges faced by African-American women leaders. This can be achieved by implementing diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives that are accurately measured and mindful of the impact of a predominantly

market-oriented culture. By doing so, organizations can create a more diverse and inclusive workplace that fosters employee growth and advancement (Beckwith et al., 2016).

Definition and Measurement

It is widely acknowledged that diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) have become increasingly important in public and academic discourse. However, despite ongoing debates over definitions and the relative importance of each component, there is an established methodology for assessing the direct effects of DEI initiatives on their target audiences. Arsel et al. (2022) noted that while some scholars have attempted to quantify the impact of DEI initiatives on corporations and society, metrics have varied from scholar to scholar, and there is no standardized approach agreed upon by scholars in the field. Similarly, Hinton and Lambert (2022) contend that the lack of consensus on appropriate metrics remains a significant challenge in evaluating the impact of such initiatives.

To address this issue, it is critical to identify accurate measurement metrics that can be used to evaluate the impact of DEI initiatives on target audiences. While it is possible to identify trends such as increased participation of African American women in the labor force, more accurate metrics are required to differentiate the impact of DEI initiatives from other factors that may influence these trends (Behrman & Gonalons-Pons, 2020). Therefore, it is essential to ensure that DEI initiatives are evaluated using rigorous and standardized metrics agreed upon by scholars in the field, enabling a more accurate assessment of their impact.

Current Trends in Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

Current trends in Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) are focused on creating more diverse and inclusive environments in various settings, such as workplaces, educational institutions, and communities. Key trends include increasing underrepresented groups'

representation, promoting cultural competence and awareness, implementing inclusive policies and practices, and addressing systemic inequities and biases. Additionally, there is a growing emphasis on allyship and advocacy, where individuals and organizations work together to create a more inclusive and equitable society. This includes taking action to dismantle oppressive systems and creating opportunities for marginalized communities to thrive (Arsel et al., 2022).

Contemporary approaches to Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) involve creating work environments that welcome and support people from all backgrounds. This includes recognizing and addressing unconscious bias, ensuring fair employee pay, and actively seeking diverse individuals for leadership roles. Organizations are also prioritizing DEI training and educational initiatives, as well as implementing policies that promote work-life balance and cater to the diverse needs of their workforce (Arsel et al., 2022).

Waning Interest

Many organizations have started allocating more resources toward diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives. However, the lack of a standardized method for defining and discerning the exact impact of these initiatives has resulted in some executives treating them as secondary to other profit-making initiatives. Establishing a direct link between DEI efforts and profit-making in many organizations is challenging, but it can reduce the emphasis on these initiatives. As noted by Hinton and Lambert (2022), "Over the past decade, institutions have earmarked more resources to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). However, many struggle to determine the effectiveness of their efforts and communicate them to the scientific community" (p. 1).

The primary objective of any organization is to generate profits and initiatives that can be demonstrated to boost profits typically receive more attention and funding. Therefore, it is

imperative to establish a clear and measurable connection between DEI initiatives and profit-making to ensure that they receive the attention and resources necessary for their success. This challenge highlights the need for organizations to develop effective metrics to measure the effectiveness of their DEI initiatives and communicate their findings to stakeholders and the scientific community (Hinton & Lambert, 2022). By doing so, organizations can demonstrate the value of DEI initiatives, which can help increase their support and ensure that they receive the necessary resources to succeed (Hinton & Lambert, 2022).

DEI initiatives are critical for creating a diverse, equitable, and inclusive workplace that benefits everyone. However, it is essential to establish a clear and measurable connection between these initiatives and profit-making to ensure that they receive the necessary attention and resources for their success. Organizations must develop effective metrics to measure the effectiveness of their DEI initiatives and communicate their findings to stakeholders and the scientific community. This way, they can demonstrate the value of DEI initiatives to the organization and the community (Hinton & Lambert, 2022).

Prioritization Of Resources

There is an ongoing debate about the effectiveness of diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives in the workplace, particularly when addressing the challenges faced by African-American women. According to several articles by Connley (2020), Green (2019), and Newkirk (2019), these initiatives can be challenging to gauge in an isolated manner, and their extents are challenging to tie to company profits.

Newkirk (2019) pointed out that diversity and inclusion initiatives at work can be tokenistic and do little to address the underlying issues of racism and sexism. These initiatives often rely on metrics that do not capture the full extent of the problem, and they can mask deep-

seated issues of discrimination and bias in the workplace. Similarly, Green (2019) argued that while diversity and inclusion initiatives are essential, they are not enough to address the systemic barriers that prevent African-American women from advancing in their careers. To truly make a difference, companies must create a culture that values diversity and actively works to eliminate discrimination and bias. Therefore, it is crucial for companies to take a more comprehensive approach that focuses on creating a culture that values diversity and actively works to eliminate discrimination and bias. Such an approach would require a long-term commitment and sustained effort to create meaningful change in the workplace. In conclusion, while diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives are crucial for creating a more equitable and just workplace, they must be implemented to address the underlying issues of discrimination and bias. Companies must take a more comprehensive approach that focuses on creating a culture that values diversity and actively works to eliminate discrimination and bias.

Market-Oriented Approach

Diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives have many challenges, partly related to companies' market-oriented approaches. According to Delanty (2019), profitability is the primary driver of corporate success, and all initiatives must fit within this framework. However, diversity, equity, and inclusion programs often fail because they are not profitable or marketable enough to make an impact (Frye, 2019).

The problem with such programs, whether related to DEI or not, is that their targets and goals must be more visibly profitable and marketable. They must cater to the needs of the majority of the population, which makes it challenging to pursue initiatives that target minority communities successfully (Frye, 2019). As a result, resources and time are typically allocated based on the number of individuals in terms of the population that calls for them, which means

that DEI initiatives and other programs to equalize social disparities tend to target minority individuals. Unfortunately, by definition, such programs have little demand because minorities represent a smaller market than the majority, which translates into a disproportionately great demand. This lack of demand makes it challenging to invest enough money to develop techniques to measure the success of such initiatives correctly. Without proper measurements, it is tough to determine the effectiveness of these programs, which can lead to a lack of funding and support. However, this is a challenging goal to achieve, given that such initiatives often target minority communities that represent smaller markets—as such, finding ways to make these initiatives more profitable and marketable is essential to ensuring their long-term success (Hinton & Lambert, 2022).

Summary

Given the literature above on the history of diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives, as well as the evolution of labor force participation by Black women, it becomes apparent that a gap does exist regarding the effect of DEI efforts on African-American women and other women of color (Hinton & Lambert, 2022).

Intersectionality is also essential to consider when dealing with diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives. It recognizes that individuals have multiple identities and that different forms of oppression intersect to create unique experiences (Crenshaw, 1989). Therefore, a more profound understanding of how race, gender, and other identities intersect is necessary to develop comprehensive and effective DEI initiatives that can help empower Black women and other women of color in corporate America. Emergent trends can be analyzed and observed scientifically in a way that helps to provide a clear direction on the way forward in helping to empower Black women within corporate America (Dill & Duffy, 2022).

From this literature review, it can be seen that across all the articles, the authors agree that there is a gap between how African American women participate in the workforce compared to how they are included and integrated into corporate America. This discrepancy occurs at all levels, ranging from low-level jobs to high-level jobs, whereby these individuals are disproportionately represented or underrepresented across the spectrum.

The main recommendations across these works (explicit or derived) focus on developing more ways to include these individuals. Therefore, some authors have recommended programs whose sole purpose is to boost the number of African-American individuals, especially women, in managerial positions. Other recommendations have increased the wages of African-American women in cases where they are overrepresented in low-paying jobs (Dill & Duffy, 2022). There is also the recommendation that African-American women be prioritized in education programs that prepare them for managerial positions. Finally, it is also vital that the system be closely examined to attempt to remove any barriers that these individuals face disproportionately. These recommendations have been implemented in one way or another but have yet to come short, as evidenced by the persistence of the problem.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this phenomenological descriptive qualitative study aimed to explore corporate diversity and inclusion initiatives focused on addressing the underrepresentation of African-American women in managerial leadership roles and their lived microaggressive experiences in career advancement.

Research Questions

How do African-American women in managerial leadership roles perceive corporate efforts related to diversity and inclusion while dealing with microaggressive experiences in career advancement?

Sub-research questions:

1. What are African American women's perceptions of tools that attempt to facilitate the corporate world's successful and unsuccessful diversity, inclusion, and equity agenda?
2. What are African American women's perceptions of how their organization's core values and culture facilitate the career progression and empowerment of women of color?

Protection of Human Subjects

As this qualitative study aims to identify gaps in previous literature and recommend ways to address them, the issue of human subjects is not a primary concern. Nevertheless, the study will carefully scrutinize the literature to ensure that it complies with international regulations designed to safeguard the rights of participants. Only studies that meet rigorous criteria for protecting human subjects will be included in this study. To uphold the privacy and confidentiality of participants, researchers may use pseudonyms instead of real names, securely store all data, and obtain written consent from participants before data collection. Furthermore,

as a standard procedure, the research will undergo review by the Institutional Review Board as an additional measure to demonstrate its commitment to protecting the rights of human subjects (Belmont Report, 1979).

Research Design

The research is a qualitative phenomenological descriptive study, meaning that qualitative methods were used to gather and analyze lived experience data (Churchill, 2022). This section provides a comprehensive overview of the research methodology and design used in the study. The overview covers various aspects, including the research questions and rationale, research design, population and sample, procedures, data collection, validity, instrumentation, data processing, assumptions, limitations, and ethical assurances. This information is essential for understanding the methodology used in the research study.

The selected articles were accessed through online libraries such as Research Gate (ResearchGate, 2023), JSTOR (ITHAKA, 2023), EBSCOhost (EBSCOhost, 2023), WorldCat.com, ProQuest Central, and Academic Search Complete. These articles were chosen based on their relevance to the study. They were validated using keywords and phrases such as women of color, DEI, diversity, equity, inclusion, Black women in corporate America, DEI in corporate America, African American women, and diversity initiatives.

According to Lambert and Lambert (2013), qualitative phenomenological descriptive studies aim to provide a comprehensive summary, using everyday language, of specific events experienced by individuals or groups. The process of analyzing data effectively typically involves a series of four critical steps. The first step, called bracketing, requires the researcher to temporarily put aside biases and assumptions to focus solely on the data. This allows the researcher to approach the data free from preconceived notions. The next step is

horizontalization, which involves organizing the data clearly and concisely. After that comes clustering, where grouping similar pieces of data will identify patterns and trends. Finally, textualization involves interpreting the data and turning it into meaningful insights that can be used to make informed decisions (Giorgi, 2012).

Population

The population for this study is African American women in the United States who hold mid-to-high-level managerial leadership positions in Fortune 500 organizations (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). The research study required participants to meet specific inclusion criteria. They have identified as African American or Black, female, between 30 and 70 years old, and have worked in a mid-to-high-level individual contributor or leadership role for at least two years (Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

Sample

To determine eligibility, the researcher sent a detailed email containing a brief explanation of the study, the IRB informed consent form, a demographic questionnaire, and a calendar link for scheduling interviews with the 15 participants (Creswell & Poth, 2023). The sample of participants consisted of African American women aged 35 to 74, with educational backgrounds ranging from four Bachelor's Degrees, eight Master's Degrees, and three Doctoral Degrees. Additionally, all participants had a minimum of two years of experience in mid-to-high managerial leadership positions. However, the majority of the women have been in their respective industries for at least ten years.

Instrumentation

The data collection process employed several instruments, including a preliminary online survey to collect demographic data and semi-structured interviews with each African

American/Black woman. An established interview protocol gathered data based on semi-structured, open-ended research questions. The researcher conducted a thematic analysis of the transcribed text from the interviews by analyzing the interpretation of words and sentence structure to identify key themes. Since interviews were conducted in two separate rounds, an abductive or iterative process of constantly comparing the collected data was used to identify themes. An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach also ensured that the researcher considered the subjectiveness of the participant's responses rather than attempting to develop objective recollections that detract from the impact of their lived experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2023).

Data Collection

Lived experience, defined as an ongoing process known from within by individuals, is rooted in the active approach of recognition (Dieumegard et al., 2019). Lived experience may be passive or active, partly reflective or holistic, and mandates that the researcher adopt a second-person and relational viewpoint (Dieumegard et al., 2019). As part of the research methodology, in addition to conducting semi-structured interviews, focus groups and journal prompts were also used to gather participant data. Focus groups were conducted via Zoom, with a maximum of six participants per group, and were moderated to ensure everyone could speak. The focus group discussions included the same participants from the individual interviews. The data collected from these discussions were analyzed using Denzin's (2014) data triangulation guidelines, which are based on the principles of data validation through multiple sources. This approach combines data from individual interviews and focus groups, ensuring that the findings are reliable and accurate. As stated by Denzin (2014), triangulation is an effective method for enhancing the

validity and reliability of qualitative research. Therefore, this study followed Denzin's (2014) guidelines to ensure the robustness of the data collected.

In addition to the focus groups, journal prompts were given to the participants to encourage them to reflect on their experiences. The journal prompts were distributed via email, and participants were given a week to complete them. The prompts were designed to elicit detailed responses that would provide further insights into the lived experiences of African-American women in mid- to high-level positions (Bernard, 2013).

The data collected through the interviews, focus groups, and journal prompts was analyzed using a software application. The analysis was guided by the principles of grounded theory, which involves identifying themes and patterns in the data (Charmaz, 2014). Using multiple data sources, including focus groups and journal prompts, helped ensure the findings' validity and reliability (Cypress, 2017).

Participants were interviewed via Zoom, which allowed the researcher to observe facial expressions and body language to a certain extent, making it feel like a pseudo-in-person experience. The interview sessions were also recorded to transcribe verbal and nonverbal communication, with participants being informed of the recording beforehand and given the option to opt-out. All participants agreed to the recordings. To maintain confidentiality, each participant was assigned a pseudonym and used that name on Zoom calls.

Using three distinct forms of data collection aims to achieve triangulation, which enables data validation through cross-verification from multiple sources. This methodology scrutinizes the coherence of findings acquired through different tools. It augments the likelihood of managing, or at the very least evaluating, some potential risks or multifarious factors that may

influence our results. Triangulation, therefore, is a robust mechanism for enhancing the reliability and credibility of research outcomes.

Data Analysis

Thematic coding, or thematic analysis, was utilized in this study to identify recurring themes in the transcribed text by analyzing the interpretation of words and sentence structures (Creswell & Poth, 2023). An iterative process of constant comparison was employed to code the data gathered from each phase of the interview process and develop codes directly from each response. The continuous comparison analysis involved the following steps:

1. Thoroughly reading through the entire set of data.
2. Dividing the data into smaller, meaningful parts.
3. Label each part with a descriptive title or a code.
4. Comparing each newly identified data part with the previously assigned codes so that similar parts were labeled with the same code.

Once all the data was coded, the codes were grouped based on their similarities, and a theme was identified and documented for each grouping, maintaining proper citation throughout (Creswell & Poth, 2023).

Design and Instrument Limitations

In qualitative research, semi-structured interviews and focus groups have limitations such as limited generalizability, bias and subjectivity, groupthink, analysis challenges, overshadowing others, interviewer influence, and the potential for participants to feel uncomfortable sharing their thoughts in a group setting. These limitations should be considered when conducting such interviews. Additionally, analyzing data from focus groups can be time-consuming and challenging due to the amount of information generated, meaning that the individual researcher's

limitations could be directly translated into the study. This makes the issue of personal bias particularly concerning. For example, I favor initiating even more DEI initiatives to help African-American women. They are a group I feel sympathy for due to their downtrodden nature, and I genuinely hope that they can overcome these challenges. While these views are not damaging, they were likely to color my analysis of the relevant literature and the tools and recommendations I made in this study. As a researcher, it is imperative to maintain objectivity and limit personal biases that may influence the study's outcome. However, despite efforts to remain impartial, biases may still exist to some extent, albeit minimal. Therefore, it is crucial for the study's readers to acknowledge the possibility of such biases and remain aware of their potential impact on the study's findings. This ultimately ensures transparency and accuracy in the dissemination of research results.

Summary

This study utilized a phenomenological qualitative design and highlighted the underrepresentation of African-American women in executive leadership positions. Leading organizations are transitioning from traditional, controlling leadership to a more inclusive and democratic approach that benefits women. While some African-American women are actively involved in organizational leadership, the study acknowledges the existence of workplace discrimination, lack of diversity and inclusion initiatives in American businesses, and educational barriers limiting their career progression (Byrd, 2014). The research focused on gathering data from a sample of African-American women in these organizations to understand the discrimination, lack of diversity and inclusion programs, and the impact of limited education on their professional advancement. Information was gathered through interviews and focus groups to gain insight into the challenges these women face in their careers.

CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH, DATA COLLECTION, AND FINDINGS

Overview

The study aimed to examine the lived experiences of African American women in managerial leadership positions and the related microaggressive experiences. The study employed a qualitative case study design utilizing a phenomenological approach to explore the research problem. The introductory chapters provided a comprehensive overview of the research problem, literature review, and the research methodology used for the study. This chapter presents the study's findings, derived from the data collected and analyzed through the conceptual framework constructed for this study.

This chapter encompasses three key areas: (a) a summary of the research design, (b) an overview of the case study settings, and (c) the study's findings. The study involved ten Black women holding managerial leadership positions who were interviewed for 45 minutes each via Zoom, using semi-structured interview questions. The data analysis revealed the participants' experiences of microaggressions in their respective work settings. The findings provide valuable insights into the microaggressive experiences faced by African American women in leadership roles.

In this chapter, the results of the study are presented in order to address the following research questions: (a) how do African-American women in managerial leadership roles perceive corporate diversity and inclusion efforts while facing microaggressions in career advancement, (b) what are African American women's perceptions of tools designed to promote successful diversity, inclusion, and equity agendas within the corporate world, and (c) how do African American women view their organization's core values and culture in terms of facilitating the career progression and empowerment of women of color? Through an analysis of the data,

themes were identified for each research question. Pseudonyms were used in the study to protect the identity of the participants.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this phenomenological descriptive qualitative study aimed to explore corporate diversity and inclusion initiatives focused on addressing the underrepresentation of African-American women in managerial leadership roles and their lived microaggressive experiences in career advancement.

Research Questions

How do African-American women in the managerial leadership roles perceive corporate efforts related to diversity and inclusion while dealing with microaggressive experiences in career advancement?

Sub-research questions:

1. What are African American women's perceptions of tools that attempt to facilitate the corporate world's successful and unsuccessful diversity, inclusion, and equity agenda?
2. What are African American women's perceptions of how their organization's core values and culture facilitate the career progression and empowerment of women of color?

Data Collection and Selection Process

Data Collection Process

In order to ensure that participants met the eligibility criteria, they underwent screening before the study was conducted (Donalek, 2004). A total of 40 respondents expressed interest by voluntarily completing a questionnaire (see Appendix B) (Smith, 2011). The selection process took into account factors such as race, gender, education level, years of experience in a managerial leadership role, and encounters with workplace microaggressions. Based on these

criteria, 15 African American women were chosen to participate in the study. During the interview process, these women shared valuable insights regarding their work relationships, interactions with colleagues from diverse backgrounds, experiences of racial microaggressions, the impact of these experiences on their health, group norms for African American women in managerial leadership roles, and the effects of these norms (Smith, 2011).

The interviews were conducted using Zoom and lasted 25 to 50 minutes, with structured interview questions (Appendix C) to collect each participant's narrative (Moustakas, 1994). The participants were informed that the interview space was a safe space where they could be completely transparent, and their responses were anonymous (Smith, 2011). During their semi-structured interviews, the participants' personal narratives granted the researcher access to the truth from their perspectives, which allowed for the discovery of the genuine and objective nature of their experiences (Schwandt, 2002). Participants shared their experiences, including educational background and career history. They were also asked to share their work experiences in which they endured subtle and extreme racial microaggressive behaviors. The participants were asked to describe these experiences, how they impacted their mental and emotional health, and how effective changes could mitigate these microaggressive behaviors to create a more inclusive workplace culture (Smith, 2011).

I recorded, transcribed, and analyzed participants' responses to identify common themes in their narratives using Otter.ai software (<https://Otter.ai>). In this chapter, I present a discussion of the research setting, participant demographics, data collection, and data analysis and identification of common themes, followed by a summary of the research's common themes produced through qualitative data analysis (Smith, 2011). All interviews with the participants were completed in a 2-week time frame (Smith, 2011).

Description and Selection of Participants

The study focused on African American women aged 35 to 74, all of whom had accrued at least two and over 25 years of experience in leadership positions. Each participant had completed at least a bachelor's degree, with several individuals holding postgraduate qualifications such as a master's or doctorate. These women had encountered a range of microaggressions within their respective professional spheres.

Table 1 - Participant Demographic

Participant	Age Group	Division/Department	Job Title	Years of Experience	Education Level
1	45-54	HR/Payroll	Vice President	5-10 years	Doctorate
2	55-64	HR/Payroll	Manager	15-20 years	Master's
3	65-74	IT	Director	21-24 years	Doctorate
4	65-74	Finance	Manager	25+ years	Bachelor's
5	35-44	HR/Payroll	Manager	2-4 years	Bachelor's
6	55-64	Legal	Manager	11-15 years	Master's
7	55-64	Health Sciences	Director	11-15 years	Doctorate
8	55-64	Medical (Nursing)	Director	25+ Years	Master's
9	35-44	Athletics	Assistant Director	21-24 years	Master's
10	34-44	HR/Payroll	Director	2-4 years	Bachelor's
11	55-64	Environmental Health & Safety	Manager	11-15 years	Master's
12	55-64	Education	Director	25+ years	Master's
13	45-54	Medical (RN Case Manager)	Manager	15-20 years	Bachelor's
14	65-74	Social Work (Field Training)	Manager	11-15 years	Master's
15	45-54	HR/Payroll	Director	5-10 years	Master's

Participant 1 - She holds a Doctoral Degree in Theology and is engaged in working with juveniles in the non-profit sector. She often reflects on her experiences as an African American woman in a managerial role, where she has been instrumental in transforming training methods. Along the way, she has encountered racism and skepticism due to her professional title. Nonetheless, she emphasizes the importance of self-assessment and evaluation, standing up for what is right, and overcoming the challenges faced in predominantly male-dominated environments.

Participant 2 - A dedicated and accomplished Human Resources professional holding a master's degree and possessing 15-20 years of industry experience, candidly described the challenges she faced in having to exert extra effort to prove herself and overcome barriers to achieve success. Additionally, she articulated the pressing need for HR to adopt a proactive stance in tackling issues of bias and inefficiency, underscoring the transformative potential of technology in optimizing processes and driving efficiency.

Participant 3 - With a Doctoral Degree in Political Science, she brings nearly 25 years of extensive experience as an IT professional. She has openly discussed how she adeptly handled challenges related to racial microaggressions by showcasing her expertise in the professional sphere. Emphasizing the value of fostering trust-based relationships and building a solid professional network, she has emphasized the significance of these aspects in overcoming barriers.

Participant 4 – Being one of the first African American women to graduate with an accounting degree from her university, she persevered despite feeling unsupported in her efforts to obtain that degree. She highlighted the significance of embracing diverse perspectives and fostering inclusive environments to facilitate the progress of African American women in leadership positions. She recounted instances of racial discrimination in the corporate setting and the obstacles encountered by black managers in recruitment and networking. Additionally, she discussed the value of allies unafraid to hire African American individuals and stressed the necessity for African American women to cultivate substantial professional networks that offer support and opportunities for their professional growth.

Participant 5 - A human resources professional with a bachelor's degree in business administration emphasized the significance of leadership training programs and stressed the importance of promoting cultural awareness in the workplace. She also shared her personal experience of feeling marginalized based on race and culture. She expressed contemplation about adopting a different name to avoid confusion and stereotyping to assimilate into the "white" culture.

Participant 6 – As a highly respected juvenile public defender in a very large county in a progressive state, she prioritizes the importance of mentorship, leadership support, and allies in overcoming microaggressions and barriers to achievement. She recounted a disheartening incident when she entered a courtroom and was immediately assumed to be the 'court reporter.' This experience served as a catalyst for her to champion a workplace culture that not only values the contributions of every employee but also actively promotes diversity in leadership roles, especially for African American women.

Participant 7 - Having earned a doctoral degree in clinical psychology and currently serving as the sole African American female leader in the largest institution of higher learning in her state, she emphasizes the significance of mentorship, cultural understanding, and supportive networks in the workplace. She candidly addressed the hurdles she encountered in a male-dominated environment, such as microaggressions and the importance of fostering inclusivity and mutual respect. Nonetheless, she highlighted the value of embracing diverse perspectives, advocating for individual contributions, and cultivating an inclusive work environment.

Participant 8 - A retired army colonel with over 25 years of service and a master's degree in nursing recently shared her firsthand encounters with racism in the military and

the lack of support for African American women in leadership positions. She also expressed the frustration that led to her retirement after being reprimanded for the first time when she reported a colleague's misconduct to her superiors. She felt unsupported by leadership when they dismissed her accusations of assault as the reaction of an “angry black woman” despite being hit with a phone.

Participant 9 - An experienced professional athlete, now serving as an associate athletic director, she candidly shared her experiences dealing with imposter syndrome, managing her time effectively, and navigating racial microaggressions in the workplace. During the discussion, she discussed the significance of self-assurance, assertiveness, and a strong support system in overcoming challenges and attaining success. She opened up about the racial obstacles she encountered throughout her athletic career and while traveling internationally. In addition, she delved into her leadership roles on and off the court, the hurdles she faced in managerial positions, and offered valuable strategies for coping with microaggressions and workplace stress. Mental health resources, encounters with workplace racism, and the significance of championing and empowering African American women in leadership positions were also addressed. Furthermore, the discussion highlighted the deficiency of diversity in leadership roles and the pressing need for more African American women to assume such positions.

Participant 10 – She is an HR professional provided valuable insights into the experiences of African American women in the workplace. She emphasized the prevalence of microaggressions, imposter syndrome, and the lack of representation and support. Stressing the significance of mentorship, self-awareness, and collective action, she underscored the need to cultivate a more inclusive workplace culture. Additionally,

she discussed workplace bias, allyship, and the necessity of dedicated diversity, equity, and inclusion functions within organizations. Moreover, she highlighted the challenges faced by African American women in leadership roles, workplace microaggressions, support and empowerment, allyship, workplace bias, and inclusivity, focusing on race and gender. The interview concluded with her discussing integrating diversity, equity, and inclusion functions within HR to promote fairness and equity.

Participant 11 - A professional specializing in health and environmental safety discussed the obstacles posed by microaggressions and the lack of support resources in the workplace. She emphasized the significance of allies, mentorship, and creating a more inclusive workplace culture. Furthermore, she shared insights into her career journey, leadership experience, and the racial challenges many African American women face in leadership roles within the health and environmental industry. In addition, she delved into strategies for navigating workplace challenges, advocating for inclusivity, and supporting and empowering African American women in the workplace. This included the acknowledgment and celebration of diverse cultural holidays. She also expressed surprise at receiving an email inviting her to a discreet monthly meeting held at a local restaurant for networking purposes for African American managerial members.

Participant 12 – She is an accomplished educator working for the Department of Education. She bravely shared her personal experiences with discrimination, racism, and prejudice, not only within her academic career but also in her professional environment. She emphasized how microaggressive behaviors, biases, and lack of representation of African American women of color in leadership positions enabled the progression of several qualified employees. In addition, she pointed out the significance of resilience,

perseverance, supportive allies, and the pivotal role of diversity and inclusion in breaking down systemic barriers.

Participant 13 - During a recent discussion, a Registered Nurse (RN) Case Manager addressed the topics of racial and gender discrimination in the workplace, internalized racism, and microaggressions within healthcare leadership. The conversation also covered disparities in pay for healthcare providers based on race/ethnicity and strategies for fostering a more inclusive workplace culture. Furthermore, she shared her personal experiences of encountering microaggressions and navigating leadership dynamics in both the Midwest and the South, describing the significance of mentorship, self-motivation, and advocacy for African American women in the workplace. Emphasizing the value of sharing experiences with younger nurses, she highlighted the role of mentorship in fostering leadership skills and promoting career development.

Participant 14 – She is a retired social worker who touched on the challenges faced by African American women in leadership roles, especially in social work and child welfare systems. She discussed microaggressions, racial disproportionality, and biases in the workplace, emphasizing the need for creating a more inclusive and equitable work environment through training and proactive measures. She also shared her experiences and observations regarding systemic issues and discrimination, highlighting the importance of addressing these issues to empower African American women in leadership roles.

Participant 15 - In a recent conversation, a seasoned human resource professional shared her experiences about grappling with the absence of mentorship, enduring toxic work environments, and navigating through persistent microaggressions in the workplace. The

discussion shed light on the pressing need for comprehensive leadership programs that embrace inclusivity and cultivate workplace cultures to champion diversity and ensure equal opportunities for every employee. Furthermore, the dialogue delved into nuanced strategies for addressing microaggressions, the pivotal role of promoting workplace diversity and fostering inclusion, the significance of providing mentorship opportunities for young women, and the methods for cultivating an environment that truly embraces diversity and inclusivity.

Presentation and Analysis of Data

Results

The content presented in this section encompasses the comprehensive findings derived from an in-depth thematic analysis, detailed individual interviews, interactive and dynamic focus group discussions, as well as insightful reflective journal entries.

Themes

Theme 1: Exploring the career trajectories and leadership roles of African American women within various workplace settings.

Theme 2: Challenges faced, including racial and gender barriers, workplace conflicts, and microaggressive behaviors, are not addressed in an acceptable manner.

Theme 3: Role of HR in addressing bias and the importance of transparency in creating an inclusive workplace culture.

Interviews

- 1. What challenges have you faced as an African-American woman in the workplace, and how have these challenges impacted your career progression and growth?**

African-American women have faced various challenges in the workplace, including discrimination, unequal pay, lack of opportunities for advancement, and stereotyping. These challenges have significantly impacted their career progression and growth by creating barriers to accessing higher-level positions, receiving fair compensation, and being able to fully utilize their skills and abilities. Additionally, the lack of representation in leadership roles has also hindered their career advancement prospects.

The challenges faced by African-American women in the workplace align with the provided themes. Theme 1, which focuses on career trajectories and leadership roles, is supported by the response as it highlights the barriers to accessing higher-level positions and the impact on career progression. Theme 2, which addresses challenges such as racial and gender barriers and workplace conflicts, is also aligned with the response as it mentions discrimination, unequal pay, and lack of opportunities for advancement. Lastly, Theme 3, which emphasizes the role of HR in addressing bias and creating an inclusive workplace culture, is reflected in the response through the mention of the importance of transparency in addressing these challenges.

2. How can African American women use their experiences and perspectives to bring about positive change in the workplace?

African American women can bring about positive change in the workplace by leveraging their unique experiences and perspectives. African American women can help create a more equitable and supportive work environment by advocating for diversity and inclusion. They can also serve as mentors and role models for other women, especially those from underrepresented communities. Additionally, speaking

up about issues related to race and gender discrimination can help raise awareness and promote change within the organization. Overall, embracing diversity and empowering African American women to share their voices and ideas can lead to a more inclusive and productive workplace for everyone.

The answer aligns with the themes in various ways. Firstly, it directly addresses Theme 1 by highlighting how African American women can leverage their career trajectories and leadership roles to bring about positive change in the workplace. Additionally, advocating for diversity and inclusion ties into Theme 3, which emphasizes the importance of creating an inclusive workplace culture. Furthermore, the idea of speaking up about issues related to race and gender discrimination resonates with Theme 2, which focuses on the challenges African American women face in the workplace, including racial and gender barriers. Overall, the answer supports and aligns with the identified themes by providing actionable ways for African American women to address these challenges and contribute to a more inclusive and supportive work environment.

3. What steps can be taken to create a more inclusive and equitable workplace culture for all employees, regardless of race or gender?

Creating a more inclusive and equitable workplace culture for all employees, regardless of race or gender, is crucial for fostering a positive work environment.

Detailed steps to achieve this include:

- a.** Implementation of Diversity Training (Aligns with Theme 2): Develop and implement comprehensive diversity training programs for all employees to raise

awareness and promote understanding of different perspectives. Include topics such as unconscious bias, cultural competence, and inclusive language.

- b. Diverse Workforce Recruitment and Promotion (Aligns with Theme 1):** Actively recruit and promote a diverse workforce through fair and transparent processes. Establish partnerships with diverse professional organizations and universities to widen the hiring pool.
- c. Clear Anti-Discrimination and Anti-Harassment Policies (Aligns with Theme 2):** Establish and communicate clear zero-tolerance policies for discrimination and harassment. Provide multiple channels for reporting incidents and ensure there are fair and timely processes for addressing complaints.
- d. Mentorship and Support Programs (Aligns with Theme 1):** Provide mentorship and support programs specifically designed to assist underrepresented groups in career advancement. This could include formal mentorship programs, access to affinity groups, and professional development opportunities.
- e. Open Dialogues and Employee Resource Groups (Aligns with Theme 3):** Encourage open and honest discussions about diversity and inclusion in the workplace. Foster the creation of employee resource groups to provide a platform for employees to connect, share experiences, and provide feedback to leadership.
- f. Regular Policy Review (Aligns with Theme 3):** Regularly review company policies and procedures to ensure they are fair, unbiased, and inclusive. This includes evaluating hiring practices, promotion criteria, and performance evaluation systems.

g. Celebrate Diversity and Inclusive Contributions (Aligns with Theme 3):

Recognize and celebrate employees' contributions from all backgrounds.

Highlight diverse role models in company communications, celebrate cultural observances, and create opportunities for employees to share their unique experiences and perspectives.

By taking these detailed steps, companies can work towards creating a more inclusive and equitable workplace culture for all employees.

Focus Group

This focus group was used to gather feedback and opinions from my diverse participants. It involved asking the participants about their perceptions, opinions, beliefs, and attitudes utilizing a preselected set of questions around diversity, inclusion, microaggression in the workplace, and conflict. The interactions also unveil the complexity of interpersonal dynamics, organizational culture, and the role of intersectionality in shaping microaggressive experiences.

1. In what ways do microaggressions affect your sense of belonging and inclusion within the workplace?

The consensus of the participants was that microaggressions have a significant impact on individuals' sense of belonging and inclusion within the workplace. All participants felt these subtle and often unintentional slights, snubs, or invalidations can create a hostile work environment, leading to alienation and isolation. They can undermine an individual's confidence, self-esteem, and professional worth, ultimately affecting their overall job productivity. Addressing microaggressions is crucial for fostering a more inclusive workplace culture. It requires proactive education, open communication, and clear policies that promote respect and sensitivity. By cultivating

an environment where diverse perspectives are valued and where individuals feel heard and respected, organizations can create a more positive and supportive workplace for all employees.

2. How do these experiences impact your overall job satisfaction and productivity?

The majority of the participants felt that the impact of these experiences on job satisfaction and productivity could be significant. When employees have positive experiences in the workplace, such as feeling valued, supported, and recognized for their contributions, it generally leads to higher job satisfaction. On the other hand, negative experiences, such as feeling marginalized, unsupported, or unappreciated, can significantly decrease job satisfaction.

Job satisfaction plays a crucial role in productivity. Employees who are satisfied with their jobs tend to be more engaged, motivated, and committed to their work. This often translates into higher productivity, as satisfied employees are more likely to put in their best effort and perform at their highest potential.

Conversely, when employees are dissatisfied with their jobs due to negative experiences, their productivity can suffer. They may feel demotivated, disengaged, and less committed to their work, leading to lower productivity levels. Overall, all the participants felt that positive workplace experiences contribute to higher job satisfaction and increased productivity, while negative experiences can have the opposite effect. It is essential for organizations to prioritize creating a positive work environment to support employee satisfaction and productivity.

3. What support or resources do you believe would be most beneficial in addressing and mitigating microaggressions in the workplace?

Most of the participants agreed that a comprehensive approach that includes various forms of support and resources is crucial to addressing and mitigating microaggressions in the workplace. Some thought beneficial resources could include specialized training programs that raise awareness about microaggressions, unconscious bias, and diversity and inclusion in the workplace. These programs can give employees the knowledge and tools to recognize, address, and prevent microaggressions.

In addition to training, establishing clear and transparent reporting mechanisms for incidents of microaggressions is essential. This could involve creating safe channels for employees to report incidents, ensuring confidentiality, and implementing fair and effective investigative procedures.

Leadership support and commitment are also suggestions vital in addressing microaggressions. When leadership takes a stand against microaggressions and supports initiatives to foster an inclusive work environment, it sets a strong example for the entire organization.

By implementing a combination of these resources and support systems, organizations can take meaningful steps to address and mitigate microaggressions in the workplace, fostering a more inclusive and respectful environment for all employees.

4. What strategies have you found effective in coping with or addressing microaggressions in the workplace?

The participants mentioned several strategies that can be effective in coping with or addressing microaggressions in the workplace. First, they mentioned that it is

important to educate oneself about what constitutes a microaggression and to develop an awareness of how it manifests in the workplace. This can involve learning about different types of microaggressions, such as verbal, behavioral, or environmental, and understanding their impact on individuals.

One strategy for coping with microaggressions is to practice self-care. This can involve seeking support from colleagues, friends, or professional networks and engaging in activities that promote well-being and resilience. It is also important to set boundaries and prioritize one's mental and emotional health in challenging situations.

In terms of addressing microaggressions, open communication is key. It can be helpful to confront the aggressor in a calm and assertive manner, expressing the impact of their behavior and advocating for respectful and inclusive interactions. In some cases, it may also be necessary to report the microaggression to human resources or other relevant authorities within the organization. Additionally, promoting education and awareness within the workplace can help prevent and address microaggressions. This may involve organizing training sessions or workshops to educate colleagues about unconscious bias, cultural competency, and the impact of microaggressions. Creating a culture of respect and inclusivity through organizational policies and practices can also address microaggressions in the long term. Ultimately, addressing microaggressions in the workplace requires a combination of individual coping strategies, open communication, and organizational initiatives aimed at fostering an inclusive and respectful environment for all employees.

Journal Prompts

During the Journal Prompts, the participants emphasized the importance of being aware of the traps in one's career due to racism, maintaining professionalism, and remaining proactive in taking leadership roles. They emphasized not letting microaggressions affect professional progress and encouraged open and honest conversations to address issues effectively. The following quotes encapsulate the main points:

- The following quote from Participant 3 aligns most closely with Theme 1, which delves into the career trajectories and leadership roles of African American women across diverse workplace environments: "Do not spend a lot of time on it because that is a distraction that can slow down your professional progress. Just be aware and keep it moving." This quote underscores the significance of avoiding distractions and prioritizing professional advancement, thereby echoing the theme of career trajectories and progression.
- It is imperative to adopt a positive demeanor when navigating diverse professional situations. As Participant 7 eloquently stated, "Approach each situation with a positive attitude. Command the room and walk in with your head held high, appearing to already be the boss." This approach entails exuding confidence and asserting leadership through authoritative presence. This outlook resonates with the theme of examining the career trajectories and leadership roles of African American women in varied workplace settings. This aligns closely with Theme 1 and encompasses the idea of projecting confidence, leadership, and a positive attitude in professional settings, which resonates with the quote's emphasis on commanding the room and appearing to already be the boss.

- "Absolutely! Don't hesitate to speak up about your experiences with microaggressions in the workplace. Our input is essential for cultivating an inclusive and supportive atmosphere." The theme that best represents Participant 6's quote is Theme 3: The Role of HR in Addressing Bias and the Importance of Transparency in Fostering an Inclusive Workplace Culture. The quote emphasizes the importance of raising awareness about microaggressive experiences in the workplace and the crucial role of feedback in nurturing an inclusive and supportive environment. This aligns with the theme of addressing bias and the importance of transparency in creating an inclusive workplace culture, which involves acknowledging and addressing microaggressive behaviors within the workplace environment.
- Participant 14's quote, "Never respond the way they expect. Play the game but be better at it," closely relates to Theme 2. This theme delves into the difficulties encountered by African American women in professional settings, such as racial and gender biases, workplace confrontations, and subtle discriminatory behaviors. The quote urges individuals to defy expectations in their responses, offering valuable insight into how to effectively and confidently confront these challenges.

Summary

In this section, all the participants recounted their experiences surmounting racial and gender barriers in their professional lives. They stressed the significance of self-assessment, mentorship, leadership backing, and fostering trust-based relationships. Additionally, they stressed the necessity of taking proactive measures to tackle bias and advance diversity in leadership roles. Their anecdotes shed light on instances of racial discrimination, lack of internal support, and being passed over for promotions despite being the more qualified candidate. They

also elaborated on the importance of workplace diversity and cultivating an inclusive environment for all employees. Nevertheless, they also emphasized the significance of developing inclusive environments and professional networks to support the advancement of African American women across various industries.

CHAPTER 5: FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In this research, my objective was to investigate the underrepresentation of African-American women in managerial leadership positions and their encounters with microaggressions while seeking career advancement. The study focused on African American women in mid-to-high-level managerial leadership roles with over two years of experience. The methodology involved conducting individual interviews with 15 eligible participants, organizing focus groups, and using journal prompts. The aim was to gain insights into these women's perspectives on corporate diversity and inclusion initiatives, as well as their microaggressive experiences in the professional environment.

Significant Findings

The key findings highlight the significance of self-assessment, mentorship, leadership support, and fostering trust-based relationships in mitigating the impact of microaggressions. They also emphasize the importance of taking proactive measures to address bias and advocate for diversity in leadership positions as a way to combat microaggressive behaviors. Additionally, the anecdotes shed light on experiences of racial discrimination, lack of internal support, and being overlooked for promotions despite being the most qualified candidate, which are all forms of microaggression. Furthermore, these findings feature the critical role of workplace diversity and the creation of an inclusive environment for all employees as a means to reduce microaggressive encounters. It also points out the importance of establishing inclusive work environments and professional networks to drive the advancement of African American women across various industries and counteract microaggressive behaviors.

The study's findings are deeply intertwined with the concept of intersectionality and the interconnection of various social identities. These findings shed light on the intersection of race

and gender, highlighting the unique challenges faced by individuals who navigate multiple marginalized identities. This underscores the importance of considering how different forms of discrimination and bias intersect and impact individuals within various work environments. Furthermore, the recognition of obstacles such as racial and gender-related barriers, workplace tensions, and microaggressions underscores the interconnection of systemic issues that can significantly impact the career progression and well-being of African American women. These challenges are not isolated but are interconnected with broader societal structures and power dynamics.

Moreover, the role of human resources in confronting bias and advocating for transparency underscores the interconnected nature of organizational dynamics and institutional practices. It stresses the need for a holistic approach that considers how various forms of bias intersect within the workplace culture and how organizational policies and practices can either perpetuate or mitigate these intersecting challenges.

In essence, the study's findings emphasize the importance of understanding and addressing intersectionality and interconnection in the context of workplace dynamics, leadership, and organizational culture. It highlights the need for a comprehensive, interlinked approach to promote inclusivity and equity for all individuals, especially those facing compounded forms of discrimination.

Implications for Action

The implications of exploring the career trajectories and leadership roles of African American women within various workplace settings could be significant. By understanding the challenges, barriers, and opportunities faced by African American women in leadership

positions, organizations and policymakers can work towards creating more inclusive and equitable workplaces. Some potential implications include:

- **Increasing Representation:** By studying the career paths of African American women in leadership positions, organizations can gain insights into how to increase diversity and representation in their own leadership teams.
- **Identifying Barriers:** Research in this area can help identify the unique challenges and barriers that African American women face in advancing their careers. This knowledge can inform the development of interventions and policies to address these barriers.
- **Inspiring Future Generations:** By showcasing the success stories of African American women in leadership roles, this research can inspire and empower future generations of women from similar backgrounds to pursue their own leadership ambitions.
- **Promoting Equity and Inclusion:** Understanding the experiences of African American women in leadership positions can contribute to creating more equitable and inclusive workplaces where individuals from all backgrounds have equal opportunities for advancement.
- **Informing Leadership Development:** Studying the leadership styles and strategies of successful African American women leaders can provide valuable insights for leadership development programs and help cultivate more diverse and effective leadership across industries.

Overall, exploring the career trajectories and leadership roles of African American women can lead to a better understanding of diversity, equity, and inclusion in the workplace,

ultimately benefiting organizations, employees, and society. Addressing the implications, challenges, and barriers associated with racial and gender issues in the workplace is imperative for cultivating a more inclusive and respectful organizational environment. The following are some essential points to take into consideration:

- **Racial and Gender Barriers:** Overcoming racial and gender barriers requires a commitment to diversity and inclusion at all levels of an organization. These barriers can lead to limited career opportunities, unequal pay, and lack of representation in leadership roles for marginalized groups.
- **Workplace Conflicts:** Workplace conflicts related to race and gender can arise from biases, misunderstandings, or unequal treatment. Addressing these conflicts proactively through open communication, conflict resolution strategies, and diversity training can help create a more harmonious work environment.
- **Microaggressive Behaviors:** Microaggressions are subtle, often unintentional actions or comments that communicate negative messages to individuals based on their race, gender, or other aspects of identity. Failing to address microaggressions effectively can harm employee morale, productivity, and well-being.

To navigate these challenges effectively, organizations can implement the following strategies:

1. Provide comprehensive diversity and inclusion training for all employees.
2. Establish clear policies and procedures for addressing discrimination, harassment, and bias.
3. Encourage open dialogue and feedback channels for employees to raise concerns.

4. Promote diverse representation in leadership positions and decision-making processes.
5. Foster a culture of respect, empathy, and understanding to mitigate microaggressive behaviors.

By actively acknowledging and addressing these challenges, organizations can create a more equitable, inclusive, and supportive workplace for all employees.

Implications of the role of HR in addressing bias and the importance of transparency in creating an inclusive workplace culture:

- **Improved organizational culture:** HR's involvement in addressing bias and promoting transparency can lead to a more inclusive and welcoming work environment for all employees.
- **Enhanced employee morale and satisfaction:** By proactively addressing bias and promoting transparency, HR can contribute to higher employee morale and satisfaction, leading to improved productivity and retention.
- **Mitigation of legal and reputational risks:** HR's efforts to address bias and promote transparency can help mitigate potential legal issues related to discrimination and contribute to a positive organizational reputation.
- **Better recruitment and retention:** A focus on inclusivity and transparency can attract a diverse pool of talent and contribute to higher retention rates, as employees feel valued and respected.
- **Organizational performance:** Addressing bias and promoting transparency can positively impact overall organizational performance by fostering innovation, creativity, and collaboration among employees.

Recommendations for mitigating bias and promoting transparency in creating an inclusive workplace culture:

- **Conduct regular bias training:** HR should implement ongoing training programs to educate employees on unconscious bias, discrimination, and the importance of creating an inclusive environment.
- **Implement transparent policies and procedures:** Develop and communicate clear policies and procedures related to recruitment, promotions, and employee relations to ensure transparency and fairness throughout the organization.
- **Foster open communication:** Encourage open dialogue and feedback channels for employees to express concerns related to bias and transparency, and actively address any issues that arise.
- **Diversify recruitment and promotion practices:** Implement strategies to attract and promote a diverse workforce, ensuring that all candidates are given equal opportunities based on their qualifications and merit.
- **Measure and track progress:** Establish key performance indicators (KPIs) to measure progress in addressing bias and promoting transparency and regularly assess the effectiveness of initiatives and policies.
- **Lead by example:** HR leaders should exemplify inclusive behaviors and decision-making, setting the tone for the entire organization and emphasizing the importance of these values.

Recommendations for Further Research

It is important for organizations and policymakers to recognize the unique challenges that African American women encounter in leadership roles and strive to cultivate more inclusive and

fair work environments. This involves implementing specific policies, mentorship initiatives, and supportive communities to empower African American women to excel in their professional pursuits. Some recommendations for organizations looking to support the career advancement and leadership development of African American women within their workplaces include:

1. **Diversity and Inclusion Initiatives:** Implementing and actively supporting diversity and inclusion initiatives that specifically focus on promoting the advancement of African American women in leadership roles.
2. **Mentorship and Sponsorship Programs:** Establishing mentorship and sponsorship programs that pair African American women professionals with senior leaders who can provide guidance, support, and advocacy for their career growth.
3. **Training and Development Opportunities:** Providing African American women employees with access to training, professional development opportunities, and leadership programs to enhance their skills and prepare them for leadership roles.
4. **Equal Pay and Promotion Policies:** Ensuring that there are fair and equitable pay and promotion policies in place to prevent gender and racial disparities in compensation and career advancement.
5. **Creating a Supportive Culture:** Fostering a workplace culture that values diversity, inclusivity, and belonging, where African American women feel supported, respected, and empowered to thrive in their careers.
6. **Employee Resource Groups:** Establishing employee resource groups or affinity networks specifically for African American women to create a sense of community, provide networking opportunities, and facilitate professional growth.

7. **Accountability and Measurement:** Holding leadership accountable for diversity goals and regularly measuring progress towards increasing representation of African American women in leadership positions.

By implementing these recommendations, organizations can create an environment that supports the career progression and leadership development of African American women, leading to a more diverse, inclusive, and thriving workplace for all employees.

Concluding Remarks and Reflections

After reflecting on the career paths and leadership positions of African American women, it has become increasingly clear that there is a pressing need for organizations and policymakers to acknowledge and tackle the challenges they encounter. Organizations can empower African American women and cultivate more inclusive and equitable work environments by implementing new policies addressing microaggressive behaviors, establishing mentorship programs, and creating supportive networks. Additionally, taking an intersectional approach is crucial to consider the unique challenges and barriers that African American women face due to the intersection of their race and gender. It is crucial to persist in advocating for the career progression and leadership growth of African American women in the workplace, fostering a diverse, inclusive, and prosperous environment for all.

According to research by Wilson and Durbin (2017), organizational change and administration play a crucial role in addressing the challenges faced by African American women in the workplace. The authors emphasize the importance of implementing organizational change strategies that support diversity and inclusion, including policies that address microaggressive behaviors, mentorship programs, and supportive networks. Furthermore, organizational leaders need to take an intersectional approach that acknowledges the unique

challenges and barriers faced by African American women due to the intersection of race and gender. This approach is essential for creating more inclusive and equitable work environments.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Informed Consent Form

Dear Research Respondents,

I am Nicole Z. Morris, a California Baptist University (CBU) doctoral student. I am researching the “Empowerment of African American Women and the Barriers Faced in the Workplace.”

This research aims to address the underrepresentation of African-American women in the human resource industry and their lived microaggressive experiences in career advancement.

The data collected from this research will only be used for educational or publication purposes. Your participation as a research respondent is entirely voluntary, and you may decide to cease participation after you have begun. The individual responses will be kept confidential, but all will be compiled, summarized, and shared with CBU for program improvement.

If you choose to participate, please complete the attached demographic questionnaire. If you decline, thank you for reading this consent statement; however, you do not need to do anything further. There are no benefits and no penalties for choosing or declining to participate. You may withdraw during the study without consequences, and your data will not be included. Your willingness to participate in this study is implied if you proceed with completing the demographic questionnaire.

Please try to answer all the questions since responding to each item will make the research results more useful. The anticipated time commitment for completing the questionnaire is approximately 5-7 minutes. No obvious undue risks are associated with completing the questionnaire. No identifying information will be collected. Data will be stored on a password-protected device. While you will receive no direct benefit from your participation in the research process, your participation will help my research better understand the views of anti-racism and trust in the police. The research is only available electronically; no alternative procedures are available now.

If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, would like to talk with someone other than the researchers about this research, or would like to report an adverse experience, you can contact the IRB (the ethics committee that oversees research at CBU) at irb@calbaptist.edu.

Thank you in advance for your consideration.

Nicole Z. Morris

Appendix B: Demographic Questionnaire

To participate in the research study, participants will need to meet the following inclusion criteria: (1) identify as African American or Black, (2) identify as female, (3) fall between the ages of 30–70, and (4) experienced economic or social disparities or challenges resulting from former or current workplace adversities.

The following questions will determine participant inclusion, as well as capture additional identity information to expand the data analysis:

1. What is your ethnic background?
 - a) African American / Black, not Hispanic or Latino
 - b) Asian
 - c) Pacific Islander
 - d) Hispanic or Latino
 - e) White, not Hispanic or Latino
 - f) American Indian or Alaskan Native
 - g) Mixed Race

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

2. What is your gender?
 - a) Female
 - b) Male
 - c) Non-binary

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

3. What is your age group?

- a) 18-29
- b) 30-39
- c) 40-49
- d) 50-59
- e) 60-69
- f) 70+

If you have selected “a” as your response above, then you do not meet the criteria for participation in the study. You do not need to complete the rest of the questionnaire.

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

- a) Entry Level
- b) Coordinator
- c) Mid-level Individual Contributor/Consultant
- d) Supervisor/Team Lead
- e) Manager
- f) Director
- g) Associate Vice President/Vice President
- h) President/Chief Operating Officer/Executive Director

If you have selected only “a or b” as your response above, then you do not meet the criteria for participation in the study. You do not need to complete the rest of the questionnaire.

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

- a) less than 2 years

- b) 2 - 4 years
- c) 5 - 10 years
- d) 11 - 15 years
- e) 15 – 20 years
- f) 21 - 25 years
- g) 26 - 30 years
- h) 31+ years

If you have selected “a” as your response above, then you do not meet the criteria for participation in the study. You do not need to complete the rest of the questionnaire.

6. What is your highest level of education completed?

- b) High School / GED
- c) Associate’s degree
- d) Bachelor’s Degree
- e) Master’s Degree
- f) Doctoral Degree

7. Have you ever experienced economic or social disparities or challenges from former or current workplace adversities?

- a) Yes
- b) No

During the individual interview, follow-up questions will expand on your responses to this questionnaire and additional inquiries about your experiences, challenges, and life lessons in advancing into leadership. Thank you for your participation.

Appendix C: Interview Questions

INTRODUCTION

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

1. Do I have your permission to record this interview?
 - a) This will conclude your interview process if you do not wish to be recorded. Thank you for your time.
2. Are you in a private location where no non-consenting individuals can accidentally enter during the interview?
 - a) If you cannot access a private location now, can we identify another date and time that works better for you?

I am now going to start the recording, and you will receive a prompt to accept the recording of this interview.

Recording:

Thank you again for participating in this research study on the *Empowerment of African-American Women and the Barriers Faced in the Workplace*. Nicole Z. Morris, a doctoral candidate at California Baptist University, is conducting this research. As part of my descriptive qualitative dissertation experience as a doctoral candidate, I am interested in gathering perspectives from someone who meets this research study's criteria. You are not obligated to participate in this interview. If you choose to discontinue participation in this interview, you can leave the interview at any time or ask that the information not be used.

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

- all transcripts will be coded with pseudonyms,

- your responses are confidential,
- only group data will be reported in the final study,
- your participation is voluntary,
- you can refuse to participate and may stop your participation at any time,
- and you may choose not to answer any question.

The interview should take approximately 45 minutes or less. If you do not want to be recorded, we will discontinue the interviews. Are you still willing to be recorded?

Do you have any questions before I begin?

First Round of Interview Questions - Career History:

1. Tell me about you and your career journey.

- a) What was your major in college, and did it prepare you for your career?
- b) Did you have a mentor or someone to whom you aspired to be?
- c) What executive-level title(s) have you had during your career?
- d) How long did it take to reach an executive-level position?
- e) What positions most prepared you for an executive-level role during your career journey?
- f) How would you characterize your leadership experience as an African American/Black woman?
- g) Are there any strategies, environments, or resources that support African American/Black women in attaining and retaining executive leadership roles?

Second Round Interviews - Career Experience:

2. Let's shift our conversation to your work experiences. What challenges have you faced as an African-American woman in the workplace, and how have these challenges impacted your career progression and growth?

- a) What strategies have you used to overcome these barriers and achieve success?
 - b) How can companies better support and empower African-American women in the workplace?
 - c) What role can allies play in helping to break down barriers and promote diversity and inclusion?
 - d) Did the lack of successful African-American women in your career path affect the advancement of your career?
 - e) Describe a time when you experienced racism in your workplace.
3. How can African American women use their experiences and perspectives to bring about positive change in the workplace?
4. What steps can be taken to create a more inclusive and equitable workplace culture for all employees, regardless of race or gender?

Appendix D: Focus Group Questions

1. In what ways do microaggressions affect your sense of belonging and inclusion within the workplace?
2. How do these experiences impact your overall job satisfaction and productivity?
3. What support or resources do you believe would be most beneficial in addressing and mitigating microaggressions in the workplace?
4. What strategies have you found effective in coping with or addressing microaggressions in the workplace?

Appendix E: Journal Prompt

Based on your career experiences, what advice would you give your 18-year-old self or other African-American women navigating similar career challenges?

Appendix F: IRB Approval

From: Institutional Review Board <IRB@calbaptist.edu>
Sent: Tuesday, May 28, 2024 9:02 PM
To: Nicole Morris <Nicole.Morris@calbaptist.edu>
Cc: Denise Nixon <dnixon@calbaptist.edu>; Institutional Review Board <IRB@calbaptist.edu>
Subject: 152-2324-EXM: Approved
IRB No.: 152-2324-EXM

Project: A Qualitative Study Examining the Empowerment of African-American Women and the Microaggressive Experiences Faced in Managerial Leadership Roles

Date Complete Application Received: [05/06/2024](#)

Date Final Revision Received: [05/20/2024](#)

Principle Investigator: Nicole Morris

Co-PI: N/A

Faculty Advisor: Denise Nixon

College/Department: JABS

IRB Approval Category: Exempt

IRB Determination: Approved – Graduate student research using a questionnaire; no minor participants; no more than minimal risk/risk appropriately mitigated; no deception utilized; acceptable consent procedures and documentation; acceptable data protection procedures. Data collection may begin in accordance with the final submitted documents and approved protocol.

Future Correspondence: All future correspondence about this project must include PI, Faculty Advisor, and reference the assigned IRB number.

Approval Information: In the case of an unforeseen risk/adverse experience, please report this to the IRB immediately using the appropriate forms. Requests for a change to protocol must be submitted for IRB review and approved before implementation. After the project ends, you are to submit a Research Closure Form.

Additional Approval Information: Approval is granted for one year from the date below. If you would like to continue research activities beyond that date, you are responsible for submitting a Research Renewal Request with enough time for that request to be reviewed and approved before the expiration of the project.

Researcher Responsibilities: The researcher is responsible for ensuring that the research is conducted as outlined in the IRB application and that all reporting requirements are met. Please refer to this approval and the IRB handbook for more information.

Date: 05/28/2024



IRB
Institutional Review Board
irb@calbaptist.edu

California Baptist University, 8432 Magnolia Ave, Riverside, CA 92504