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# Lived Experiences of African American Women Encountering Barriers in Executive Level Advancement in the Business Services Industry

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# Walden University

College of Management and Human Potential

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Sheriley Yvonne Smith

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2023

Abstract

Lived Experiences of African American Women Encountering Barriers in Executive  
Level Advancement in the Business Services Industry

by

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MA, The University of Oklahoma, 2004

BS, Campbell University, 1995

Proposal Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Industrial and Organizational Psychology

Walden University

August 2023

## Abstract

It is unknown how African American Women (AAW) perceived experiences involving the experience of the barriers faced when attempting to advance to executive levels in their corporate jobs. Existing literature showed that AAWs experienced several forms of discrimination, including racism, oppression, and limitations which were critical to examining their work experience and progressing up the corporate ladder. The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to develop an understanding of lived experiences of AAWs when they apply for and fail to reach executive positions in the business services industry. The glass ceiling theory (GCT) and intersectionality theory (IT) were used to understand the study phenomenon. Data were collected through interviews and analyzed via thematic analysis. Thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews with 12 AAWs revealed three qualitative themes: challenges to career advancement due to workplace barriers and biases, failure to ascend due to discrimination against race and gender, and barriers to success in terms of the glass ceiling. Recommendations for future research include assessing mental and physical wellbeing for adverse outcomes, reviewing allyship experiences, and researching hiring biases. Recommendations for future practices included centering AAWs in terms of inclusivity and diversity policy creation and implementation, implementing external committee investigations, and implementing clear guidelines for hiring procedures and feedback assessments. Implications for positive social change included recognizing the need for equality practices in hiring AAWs.

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## Dedication

This study is dedicated to women and, more specifically, the African American or Black woman who continues to press forward in their career goals despite the oppressive and discriminatory experiences. Please know that this study will again bring attention to this ongoing issue of Black women being underrepresented in corporate America. I hope there will soon be a more diverse, balanced workforce based solely on the best-qualified applicant at all levels in corporate America.

Finally, this study is also for corporations seeking to re-evaluate and improve the underrepresentation of Black women in their executive-level positions. How would you want your daughter, sister, or mother treated in corporate America? Then do something about it.

## Acknowledgments

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Finally, this study is also dedicated to my spouse and family. Thank you for having faith in my ability, even when I was discouraged about the process of completing this study. I love and genuinely appreciate you and thank God for blessing me.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

The topic of this study was lived experiences of African American Women (AAWs) in the workplace, with a focus on AAWs seeking advancement to executive positions. This research was crucial because of the lack of advancement experienced by AAWs involving executive positions. Therefore, this research had crucial social implications. My goal was to understand how AAWs experience barriers involving advancement to executive positions and strategies to support understanding how to support the advancement of AAWs.

Chapter 1 includes an introduction to the study. The chapter began with a description of background information, focusing on establishing a knowledge gap. The chapter continues with the problem and purpose of the study. I used a phenomenological design to develop an understanding of lived experiences of AAWs when they apply for and fail to reach executive positions in the business services industry. Research questions and the theoretical framework were also presented in this Chapter. The theoretical frameworks were the glass ceiling and intersectionality theories. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the nature of the study and assumptions, delimitations, and limitations.

### **Background**

Lived experiences of AAWs in the workplace were the focus of several studies. Beckwith et al. (2016) examined the alleged or actual barriers that prevented AAWs from professionally advancing in their careers and reported gender and race continue to be a prime reason for AAWs remaining unpromoted to executive levels, although they may

qualify for positions. These barriers unethically and unlawfully hinder their progression and limit the improvement of socioeconomic status. This situation has also caused AAWs to battle with low self-esteem and confidence. This qualitative study involved analyzing a population of corporate AAWs by collecting statistical data on whether these women could progress in their corporate jobs following their peers. Findings revealed AAWs encounter race and gender biases that other employees of American corporations do not face. Therefore, there was a need to address these barriers and related stereotypes to which AAWs are subjected, resulting in inequalities and attrition.

Bernard et al. (2020) investigated lived experiences of 21 AAWs in corporate America who hold, have held, or qualify to hold a leadership position in corporations in Canada and found this population experienced many forms of discrimination, racism, oppression, and typecasting, which affected their careers or promotion opportunities. Several internal and external barriers affected their success at the workplace. Racism was the leading cause on the job. Davis and Maldonado (2015) reported racial and gender bias were obstacles when AAWs sought to rise to executive-level positions. Comprehending AAWs' experiences as leaders is critical for advancing opportunities.

Greene (2019) revealed that not hiring AAWs in executive-level positions could deprive organizations of the knowledge and skills these people possess. Hideg et al. (2019) recommended future research to focus on understanding women's underrepresentation in top leadership positions. They asserted that such information would help in terms of the identification of methods that can be used to assist employees and corporations in terms of treating all employees equally. A critical gap in the body of

research concerned the career experiences of AAWs, specifically where they encounter barriers involving executive-level advancement.

### **Problem Statement**

The problem is that AAWs are underrepresented in executive positions in the business services industry (Bernard et al., 2020; Salsberg & Kastanis, 2018). Since the 1980s, AAWs have remained underrepresented in Chief Executive Officer (CEO) and other executive positions (Carter & Peters, 2016; Sawyer, 2017). In 2014, only 16% of executive-level positions were held in U.S. corporations, out of which 5.3% were held by African American or Black individuals (Beckwith et al., 2016). Cain (2015) reported AAWs held the fewest executive-level positions as of 2015. All women face barriers to advancing in their organizations, but this situation is worse for AAWs. The concrete ceiling blocks the career progression of AAWs (Beckwith et al., 2016; Bibi & Afsar, 2018; Greene, 2019; Harris & Lieberman, 2015). The ceiling physically and psychologically confines AAWs to entry-level jobs throughout their careers, with few options to excel, irrespective of their educational backgrounds, skillsets, or experiences (Bernard et al., 2020; Salsberg & Kastanis, 2018). Even when AAWs reach supervisory and management positions, their supervisors often undermine their power, leaving them with minimal authority over their subordinates (Carter & Peters, 2016; Cheeks, 2018; Fernandes & Alsaeed, 2014). There is a lack of knowledge regarding how AAWs perceived their experience involved with hitting the concrete ceiling when they attempted to advance to executive levels in their corporate jobs. AAWs experience forms of discrimination, including racism, oppression, and microaggressions which must be

evaluated to improve their ability to progress in their careers (Bernard et al., 2020; Norman et al., 2018).

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of the phenomenological study is to develop an understanding of lived experiences of AAWs when they apply for and fail to reach executive positions in the business services industry. While previous studies focused on barriers faced by current AAW executives, this study examined those aspiring to reach but not currently holding executive-level jobs. In addition, I sought to expand on the current body of knowledge regarding this topic and increase awareness to assist leadership decisions and improve employment policies in corporate America.

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions were developed based on the study's problem, purpose, and theoretical frameworks.

RQ1: What meaning do AAWs make concerning their race and gender experiences during attempts to advance their careers?

RQ1a: How do AAWs understand the role race plays in their lived experiences when applying for executive positions in the business services industry?

RQ1b: How do AAWs understand the role gender plays in their lived experiences when applying for executive positions in the business services industry?

RQ1c: How do AAWs understand the role race and gender play in their experiences after being passed over for higher positions?



RQ2: How do AAWs describe barriers they faced when attempting to advance in corporate America?

### **Theoretical Framework for the Study**

The glass ceiling theory (GCT) and intersectionality theory (IT) were used for the current study to assist in understanding the study phenomenon. The GCT is used to examine challenges encountered by women in the U.S. workforce. The theory resulted from limited career advancement for women and ethnic minorities despite increased emphasis on diversity and fairness in hiring in the wake of Affirmative Action Executive Order 1095 of 1964 (Daley, 1998). The career advancement gap is still evident.

According to the U.S. Department of Labor (2019), AAWs accounted for 60.5% of the workforce compared to White women at 56.8%; they represented 1.3% of chief or executive senior management roles. The barriers before Affirmative Action Executive Order 1095 of 1964 remained existent for AAW despite legal changes(Oakley, 2000). Despite Affirmative Action Executive Order 1095 of 1964 advocating for the career advancement of women and ethnic minorities in the U.S. workforce, the same barriers remained. Oakley (2000) demarcated three explanations for the glass ceiling: corporate practices in recruitment, retention, and promotion, stereotypes and preferred leadership styles by White men, and the longstanding patriarchal culture in American society.

The IT discusses how individual identities (e.g., race, gender, and disability) intersect and affect individuals (Crenshaw, 1989). IT is a specific analytical framework for observing and correlating personal social identities. The most common identity categories are race, gender, religion, socioeconomic status, and sexuality (Hornung et al.,

2019; Kalin & Sambanis, 2018). The IT evaluates social and discriminatory factors that, when combined, create oppression within society. Hatred, microaggressions, and outright bigotry are common issues faced by AAWs working in executive positions (Smith, 2021).

The IT was designed to facilitate the examination of the intersection of multiple minority statuses in the same individual. According to Crenshaw (1989), individual identities include nationality, disability status, sexual orientation, gender, and race. These identity categories can lead to both privilege and marginalization. Dependent upon each identity, there is a risk of increased marginalization and discrimination (Crenshaw, 1989). The IT was a framework for understanding how individuals with various identities experience discrimination and oppression. All humans are complex collections of identities that span various experiences but experience oppression and inequality regardless of their individuality (Crenshaw, 1989). The IT is used to understand how different individual identities foster different social experiences, inequality, and marginalization (Crenshaw, 1989).

These GCT and IT were useful to understanding the ostracization experienced by AAW through considering systematic factors contributing to prejudice and exclusionary treatment. The IT theory was appropriate for the study as it provided scope for understanding the unique experiences of AAW, which included harassment and discrimination based on their own identities. To develop an understanding and establish the best theoretical foundations for this study of AAWs in corporate America, these two theories contributed to the development of unstructured interview protocol items. The IT

and GCT examined how AAW supervisors address hindrances to advancement in corporate America.

### **Nature of the Study**

I used the qualitative method for this study. According to Pratt et al. (2020), the effectiveness of qualitative research is based on my ability to form strong interpretations from participants' experiences and formulate study findings. A benefit of this research method was its focus on communication. As a result, findings can be used to explain the phenomenon involving gender inequalities in leadership and its effect on AAW experiences and opportunities in corporate America. Data for this qualitative study were collected via one-on-one interviews with a single focus group of AAWs who have not reached executive levels in their places of employment but have applied for such positions.

The phenomenological design involves a philosophical investigation of individual experiences and perceptions (Matua & Van Der Wal, 2015). I used a qualitative phenomenological approach to investigate AAWs' personal experiences. In this study, I focused on examining career suppression of AAWs as they were repeatedly overlooked for executive-level promotions, despite being most qualified. I identified trends based on participant data regarding their lived experiences using the phenomenological research method. The phenomenological methodology increased its validity based on participants' perceptions of their work experiences in corporate America.

### **Assumptions**

There were two key assumptions made in this study. First, I assumed AAWs participating in the study experienced some degree of discrimination that created barriers to obtaining an executive position and that they had not yet become a senior manager or executive due to merit. Finally, I assumed participants were honest about their descriptions of lived experiences.

### **Scope and Delimitations**

Several delimitations existed for this study. All participants were AAWs. Women of other ethnicities could have similar lived experiences involving barriers to advancement. However, this study is delimited to just this population. All participants were seeking to advance in for-profit organizations. There was the possibility that focusing on participants working in nonprofit organizations would lead to different outcomes. The study was delimited to only explore the lived experiences of women. The study was also delimited to examine the topic through the GCT and IT theoretical frameworks.

### **Limitations**

This study had limitations, challenges, and barriers. Limitations are potential weaknesses not within the researcher's control but are based on constraints associated with the study design or instrument (Price & Murnan, 2004; Theofanidis & Fountouki, 2018). Limitations are important to acknowledge as they can affect study outcomes (Theofanidis & Fountouki, 2018). The study was limited to a purposive sample of AAWs working in large corporations in the U.S. The findings are not transferable to research outside of this context. The study is also limited to understanding lived experiences,

which are unique to each individual and are not possible to replicate among other study contexts. To address these limitations, I employed reflexive journaling (to mitigate personal bias) and triangulation to improve study credibility and discussed recommendations for research and practice in Chapter 5.

### **Significance**

This study involved filling a gap in the literature concerning AAWs' experiences with hitting a concrete ceiling as they strive to advance in their corporate jobs. This study was innovative in that it involved explicitly examining the lived experiences of AAW as corporate employees, which were previously absent from the available literature. Highlighting the experiences of AAW centered their voices and illuminated opportunities for change. The findings of this study supplemented currently limited data on the prevalence of critical race issues in corporate America. Findings may be used to enlighten corporate owners about perceptions of their AAW employees regarding their lived work experiences, diversity in executive positions, and how their behaviors can affect AAWs who work for them. The findings of this study could also aid corporate America in gaining insights regarding AAWs' personal feelings about their work experiences and career growth. Finally, American corporations could use this data to examine inequality in their diversity programs and hiring practices and honestly and actively make necessary changes to ensure equality. The findings of this study concerning unique challenges faced by AAWs in U.S. corporations may lead to improvements in hiring practices and entire talent development processes followed by organizations, including attracting and hiring talent, development, positioning, and promotion. Consequently, these changes may

positively affect the living standards, financial standing, and economic status of AAWs, their families, and their communities.

### **Summary**

Chapter 1 included an introduction to the study. This was followed by a description of background information, with a focus on establishing the existence of a knowledge gap. The chapter continued with the problem and purpose of the study. The purpose of the phenomenological study was to develop an understanding of lived experiences of AAWs when they apply for and fail to reach executive positions in the business services industry. The research questions and theoretical framework followed. The theoretical frameworks were the GCT and IT. The chapter concluded with a discussion of the nature of the study, followed by assumptions, delimitations, and limitations. Chapter 2 includes a comprehensive review of extant literature related to the problem. The chapter begins with an explanation of the theoretical foundation of the study. It is followed by a literature review related to key concepts.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

AAWs are underrepresented in CEO and executive positions (Carter & Peters, 2016; Sawyer, 2017). Beckwith et al. (2016) found as of 2014, only 16% of executive-level positions in the U.S. corporate sector were occupied by women, while only 5.3% were AAWs. While White women also face significant barriers to advancement, AAWs struggle considerably with barriers that influence their ability to advance beyond entry-level jobs (Bernard et al., 2020; Salsberg & Kastanis, 2018).

Struggles of AAWs to reach advancement in corporate organizations is referred to as the concrete ceiling and is characterized by substantial struggles, obstacles, and racism (Beckett, 2020; Beckwith et al., 2016; Bibi & Afsar, 2018; Greene, 2019; Harris & Lieberman, 2015). Barriers and obstacles remain due to the constant undermining of power, reduced authority, and continued experiences involving racism and sexism in the workplace toward AAWs (Carter & Peters, 2016; Cheeks, 2018; Fernandes & Alsaeed, 2014).

I revealed an acute need to examine lived career experiences and career advancement barriers affecting AAWs seeking executive-level or CEO positions in U.S. corporations. Current literature is predominantly focused on AAWs who current executives are, career advancement opportunities based on race and gender, and issues involving systematic racism, which influence the ability of AAWs to overcome barriers in terms of career advancement.

AAWs experience several forms of discrimination, including racism and oppression (Bernard et al., 2020; Dadanlar & Abebe, 2020; Norman et al., 2018). In

addition, AAWs lived experiences during the application process significantly influence their perception of the process of advancing into executive-level positions with AAWs (Cain, 2015; Sepand, 2015).

There is an absence of readily available research specifically exploring AAWs perceive their experiences involving the concrete ceiling while attempting to advance to executive levels in their corporate jobs. As such, the purpose of this proposed phenomenological study was to understand lived experiences of AAWs when they apply for and fail to reach executive positions in the business services industry. It is not known how AAWs perceive their experiences regarding this topic. The literature review includes key variables involving AAWs, their attempts to gain executive positions, and underlying barriers associated with systematic racism and career advancement. I address the GCT and IT. Both theories are discussed at length and in terms of application to the study. Next, I include a literature review involving diversity in the workplace and AAWs in executive positions. This includes literature regarding AAWs in the workplace and workplace issues they face involving career advancement. I then examine AAW's professional and personal barriers. Finally, my review concludes with a summary of salient topics.

### **Literature Search Strategy**

The databases accessed for the literature review were ProQuest, EBSCOHost, SAGE Journals, PubMed, and Web of Science. I used the following keywords: *African American* or *Black working women*, *gender stereotyping in the workplace*, *workplace issues faced by AAWs*, *Black women in corporate jobs*, *black employees*, *intrinsic*



*motivation, psychological empowerment, African American women executives, Black women leaders, women leaders, corporate diversity, diversity at work, Black leadership, working women, Black women in corporate jobs, glass ceiling, concrete ceiling, African American women executives, and barriers to women of color.*

Sources were published between 2018 and 2022. I aimed to examine literature within a limited period to gain current information. I used English-only and full-text peer-reviewed studies to review the information available and prevent translation errors. Dissertations and conference proceedings were not used in this study to ensure the reviewed information was peer-reviewed. Research published before 2018 was used to ensure a thorough discussion of the GCT and IT and previous application studies.

### **Conceptual Foundation**

The conceptual framework that guides this study is an amalgamation of intersectionality theory that contextualizes social injustices and their influence on the career growth of women of color. The GCT and IT were applied to the study to frame the exploration of lived experiences of AAWs when they apply for and fail to reach executive positions in the business services industry. In this section, I present the origin and source of each theory, underlying theoretical propositions, and previous literature specific to these theories. Subsequently, I provide a detailed understanding of the application of these theories to the current study.

### **GCT**

The GCT was created by Daley to contextualize the need for addressing underlying inequalities experienced by women in terms of career advancement. The GCT

was created to identify underlying ideologies, systems of power, and inequalities that prevent women's successful career advancement (Daley, 1998; Jauhar & Lau, 2018). The term *glass ceiling* was coined to demonstrate the substantial barriers to career advancement (Daley, 1998; Jauhar & Lau, 2018). These challenges are much more substantial for Black women than their White counterparts due to race and gender-based stereotypes and prejudices (Daley, 1998; Jauhar & Lau, 2018).

According to the U.S. Department of Labor (2019), the advancement gap is mainly unaffected despite the previous legislative precedents introducing diversity and inclusivity measures in the American workforce. For example, 60.5% of the workforce are AAW, while 56.8% are White women; however, only 1.3% of chief or executive senior management roles are AAW (Smith et al., 2018). For AAWs, career advancement is characterized by the concrete ceiling in which advancement is challenging and often impossible (Beckwith et al., 2016; Bibi & Afsar, 2018; Greene, 2019; Harris & Lieberman, 2015).

## **IT**

Crenshaw (1989) noted that the underlying tenets of second-wave feminism were founded upon the ideologies of White-based privilege and suppression, which though important to identify and address, ignored discriminatory inequalities experienced by women of color. Crenshaw (1989) argued that considering various identities, such as nationality, disability, sexual orientation, gender, and race, is essential to understanding the elements of individuality that contribute to privilege and marginalization. Crenshaw

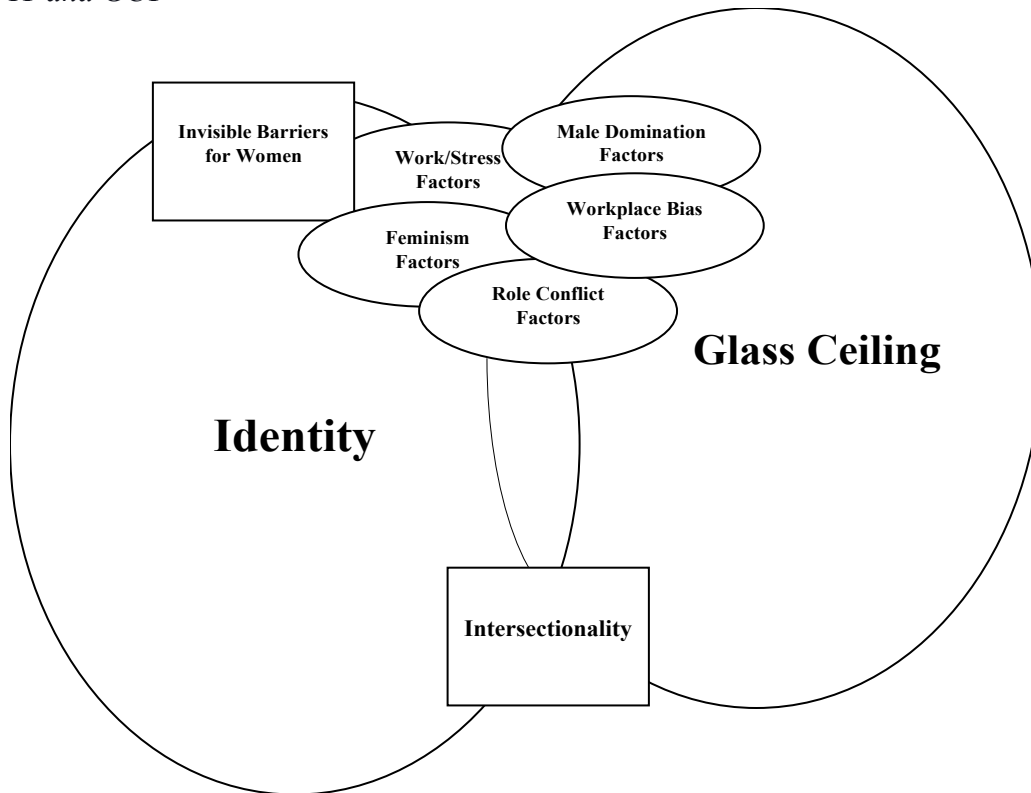
(1989) referred specifically to the experience of AAW as double oppression, in which Black women face systematic racism and oppression from a dominant patriarchal culture.

Crenshaw (1989) argued that “Because the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism, any analysis that does not take intersectionality into account cannot sufficiently address the particular manner in which Black women are subordinated” (p. 12). For example, White women experience privilege from a system of Whiteness while experiencing subjugation due to gender. In turn, individuals have multiple identities spanning ethnicity, race, sexuality, gender, and disability that require complex consideration when discussing systems of oppression and inequality (Ireland et al., 2018; Moorosi et al., 2018).

The IT is used substantially to conceptualize AAW experiences, personally and professionally, in a modern climate. The IT is also employed to examine the experiences of AAW regarding the glass ceiling, feminism, and the challenges associated with professional advancement (Atewologun, 2018; Coles & Pasek, 2020; Settles et al., 2020).

### **Application of Theories to the Current Study**

Combining the GCT and IT consists of first recognizing each theory (see Figure 1). Understanding the theoretical countenance associated with I/O psychology provides a framework for understanding barriers specific to the career advancement of AAW. Furthermore, the combination of GCT and IT embodies the specific legal and workplace-based inequalities that create subvert and overt barriers to AAW regarding career advancement based on the GCT. Figure 1 illustrates the application of these theories to the current study.

**Figure 1***IT and GCT*

In figure 1, the factors of identity and the glass ceiling are two unique factors. When following the IT theories constructs, identity is a barrier for AAW to advancement. The intersection between differing identities includes race, gender, and workplace inequalities as voiced by AAW concerning their career advancement experiences.

GCT theory limitations are rooted in the White-dominated ideologies guided by the founding feminist authors (Daley, 1998; Jauhar & Lau, 2018). The work of founding feminist activities was invaluable, yet intersectionality was absent (Cohen et al., 2020). The voices, opinions, and considerations of oppression specific to AAW were often

absent from the earliest theoretical foundations of GCT (Greene, 2019). As a result, combining the theories of IT and GCT provides a holistic framework that is inclusive of the struggles present for AAW, which encompass multiple social, psychological, and legal systems globally (Beckwith et al., 2016; Bibi & Afsar, 2018; Greene, 2019; Harris & Lieberman, 2015). The GCT will also provide a framework for demonstrating the case and influence of the concrete ceiling specific to the lived experiences of AAW. In this study, the GCT will emphasize the reality of the relationships between legality and racial inequalities experienced by AAW, as highlighted by their voices.

The GCT and IT frameworks alone are insufficient to explain the stories of AAW, as presented in this study. Together, these two frameworks provide a model, shown in Figure 1, for exploring identity, barriers, challenges, bias, male domination factors, work and stress factors, feminism factors, and role conflict factors for AAW related to advancing their careers, and the discrimination in the workplace that impedes such career advancement. In addition, the deliberation of the study findings through a holistic lens allowed me to present and highlight the voices of AAW regarding their lived experiences of AAW in corporate America.

### **Literature Review Related to Key Variables**

Existing literature reviewed in this section was synthesized into several categories with headings and sub-headings arranged based on the topics, the methodology, the research design, and the outcomes. These categories include the inclusion of AAW in the workforce and the modern representation of AAW in corporate structures, with two sub-topics of the effect of absent AAW in leadership and coping with navigating career paths.

The next topic was the effect of racism and sexism with sub-topics on psychological challenges, racism, job satisfaction, and identity challenges. The concluding topic is the absence of inclusivity standards.

### **Inclusion of AAWs in the Workforce**

Since the 1930s, the proportion of women in executive and management positions has risen (Agyeiwaa & Attom, 2018; Yeh, 2018). The representation of female leaders varies according to specific fields of business (Agyeiwaa & Attom, 2018; Yeh, 2018). However, overcoming sexism and racism is vital for AAW seeking career advancement (Yeh, 2018). Historically, the term leader was rooted in traditionalistic and paternalistic ideologies regarding women as inherently maternal and incapable of authority (Agyeiwaa & Attom, 2018; Yeh, 2018). A heavily dominated male culture rendered women of color invisible while upholding oppressive ideologies rooted in erroneous and obsolete dogmas (Agyeiwaa & Attom, 2018; Yeh, 2018).

Among the first examinations specific to communities of color concerning oppression, barriers, and challenges for leadership integration were supplied by Trehan (1999). Trehan (1999) detailed the stories of 30 AAWs within corporate America alongside their experiences, barriers, and challenges in the workplace. Trehan (1999) used the term concrete ceiling by illustrating the experiences faced by an AAW in terms of examples of sexism and racism. Whitaker (2019) argued that the discriminatory barriers faced by AAW lead to the inability to gain career progression. In addition, perceptions of AAWs regarding their previous work experiences indicate that discrimination has continued to influence social and financial mobility. Sawyer (2017)

revealed that organizations fail to increase diversity, influencing corporate financial standing and capabilities. While corporate America can create positive social change, the current methods for diversity and inclusion are lacking for AAW (Sawyer, 2017; Whitaker, 2019).

For Black women, many non-entry-level fields were male-dominated and inherently against the inclusion of diversity regardless of legal precedence (Bravata et al., 2019; Francis & Darity, 2021). Despite *Brown v. Board of Education*, 347 U.S. 483 (1954), many workplaces across the United States openly or subvert denied AAW access to work at even basic positions (Bravata et al., 2019). The end of segregation led to what Francis and Darity (2021) considered *de facto* segregation. While legally AAWs are allowed entry, they are ultimately denied equality and parity amongst their peers. The same evidence of disparities and discrimination against AAW is also present in the past ten decades of corporate research (Brown et al., 2017).

### **Modern Representation of AAWs in Corporate Structures**

The International Business Machines (IBM) Institute for Business Value Nurturing Black Women Leaders (2021) supplied a contemporary insight into gender and racial disparities. According to the IBM (2021) report, “for every 100 men promoted to their first manager role, only 58 Black women receive the same advancement” (p. 3). In tandem, these effects are felt amongst AAW communities, in which only 43% of Black women report feeling successful compared to their peers. IBM (2021) further referred to the “shrinking leadership pipeline” in which a significant amount of time and money is spent on mentorship programs, which some participants referred to as “sometimes we are

over-mentored and under-sponsored” (p. 8) about the lack of promotion despite the diversity of mentorship initiatives.

Data were drawn from the 590 companies’ participation in data regarding women in the workplace. According to the report, Black women receive less support from managers (24% compared to 30% of White women), Black women are less likely to interact with senior leaders (41% compared to 34% of White women), and are more likely to face microaggressions in the workplace (40% compared to 27% of White women). According to LeanIn (2021), Black women are also likely to report feeling singled out as the only Black woman, pressure to perform, defensiveness, and feeling left out. Regarding a sense of allyship from other White women, while 81% of women and 82% of men report allyship, only 26% of Black women feel as if they have allies or have seen other allies speak out against racism in the workplace. The LeanIn (2021) report, in tandem with reports such as IBM (2021), demonstrates the continued reflections of AAW who lack inclusive experiences, a sense of belongingness and experience sexism, racism, and discrimination in the workplace despite the creation of inclusivity and diversity initiatives.

Despite the recommendations of earlier researchers, AAWs are substantially underrepresented in executive positions (Elias, 2018; Yeh, 2018). In entry-level and leadership positions, AAWs are discriminated against professionally and personally (Yeh, 2018). Elias (2018) identified that Black, Hispanic, and Asian women hold just 3% of board director roles within Fortune 500 companies, making up only 17% of the workforce. Additionally, among this 17%, only 4% rise to executive or managerial



positions (Elias, 2018). In educational leadership contexts, which are heavily researched, Wiley et al. (2017) found that in 2017 over 80% of superintendents across the country were male despite female teachers dominating the faculty staff. While Fairlie et al. (2014) identified that in 2014, women comprised approximately 84% of the teaching workforce within United States public schools, but female leaders only comprised 29% of principalships, and African American women held only 10% of principalships. While AAWs remain overrepresented in some sectors, they are also underrepresented in leadership fields in both corporate and educational sectors (Elias, 2018; Fairlie et al., 2014; Yeh, 2018).

According to Smith (2021), AAWs remain underrepresented amongst the C-suites of Fortune 500 companies across the United States. In 2020, 37 out of the Fortune 500 companies were held by AAW. In sum, 7.4% of AAW were leaders of Fortune 500 companies as of 2020. AAW, such as Rosalind Brewer, the CEO of Walgreens, and Thasunda Brown Duckett, the CEO of TIAA, are among the first to hold CEO positions of Fortune 500 companies as Black women. Smith (2021), gathering data from the 2015 study by Coqual, identified that lacking sponsorship of Black women is one of the primary reasons women do not ascend to the C-suites within Fortune 500 companies. Earlier sponsorships were primarily White men (73.5%), negatively affects the inclusion of AAW within C-suites amongst Fortune 500 companies (Smith, 2021). Roberts et al. (2018) also provided details regarding the career path of AAW graduating from Historically Black Colleges and Universities. Using data from 1977 to 2015, a group of 532 AAWs was identified, of which sixty-seven attained the chair position, C-level

executive, CEO, or other executive management positions. Thirty interviews were conducted to identify potential challenges, barriers, and opportunities for change. In one case, an AAW senior executive described her initial experiences as challenging to start: “Senior executives would say, ‘Sure, you can come in’, because they doubted me--If they had known I was going to come in and get the jobs they wanted, they probably would have said no.” (p. 12). Both Roberts et al. (2018) and Smith (2021) reflected that the difficulties faced by AAW are framed by hypervisibility, invisibility, and racism specific to gender and racial stereotypes, which require immediate change within corporate structures.

### ***Effects of Absent AAWs in Leadership***

The absence of gender and racial diversity poorly affects corporate structures (Glass & Cook, 2020a; Hirigoyen & Ousseini, 2017). Hirigoyen and Ousseini (2017) revealed that corporate structures with only male leaders in senior management teams were 15% less profitable than those in which women comprise 30% of executive roles. According to a 2015 report by the McKinsey Global Institute, twelve trillion dollars would be contributed to the gross domestic product (GDP) by 2025 if diversity and inclusivity measures were instrumented by corporate structures as intended by affirmative action legislation of the 1980s and 1990s. However, Glass and Cook (2020b) and Offermann and Foley (2020) noted that gender and racial diversity amongst executive leaders could exceed financial performance and lead to improved objective performance outcomes, such as engagement, social responsibility, and improved social reputation.

### *Coping to Navigate Career Paths*

Navigating racial and gendered barriers is an ongoing challenge for AAW (Curtis, 2017). Curtis (2017) argued that overcoming and coping with the experience of role loneliness and challenges associated with wanting to be accepted by White colleagues and school families are prevalent daily experiences among Black women leaders working within a homogeneous teaching workforce. According to Curtis (2017), AAWs also have difficulties as leaders due to the potential fear of rejection, barriers in their career advancements, and their lack of power or mandate to challenge the daily micro-invalidations encountered in the job (Curtis, 2017). In addition, Curtis (2017) further stated that the multitude of racial politics within institutions, such as flawed hiring and recruitment systems, makes job retention difficult for minorities, especially those who work in White-dominated schools, where they do not experience a sense of belonging and a form of support system. Overall, the multitude of experiences of AAW regarding racism, microaggressions, and ascending to leadership require a refined set of coping skills (Curtis, 2017).

Coping strategies can include strategies of resistance that involve using their voice as power, collective strategies that require support networks, and self-protective strategies of AAW (Burton et al., 2020; Spates et al., 2020). Spates et al. (2020) also provided three broad categories of how United States-born AAWs cope with gendered racism: (a) depending on social support, (b) shifting as needed, and (c) relying on their religion or spirituality. Spates et al. (2020) highlighted that these strategies do not appear to be exclusively applicable to gendered racism but serve as shields in Black women's

daily lives. Burton et al. (2020) also argued that maladaptive strategies include practices that enable the individual to disengage or disconnect from their experiences of gendered racial discrimination via avoidance, denial, hypervigilance, and self-preparation. Spates et al. (2020) and Burton et al. (2020) found increased depressive symptoms associated with avoidance coping and failed to reduce the stress of gendered racism. While coping can be one method to ensure AAW overcomes barriers in the workplace, it may not be effective for all (Burton et al., 2020; Spates et al., 2020).

Coping strategies employed by AAW to overcome barriers associated with gendered racism provide some context for the effects of the concrete ceiling (Fenerci et al., 2019). Fenerci et al. (2019) examined the coping strategies employed by AAW as a means of dealing with gendered racism in both professional and personal circles. A sample of 150 AAWs aged 18 to 59 was surveyed regarding their emotional support, pre-existing psychological distress, and perception of psychological distress regarding stereotypes regarding Black womanhood. Fenerci et al. (2019) reported that perceived social support, the strong Black woman schema, and psychological distress were commonly reported by AAW. In addition, Chance (2022) argued that AAWs aligned with the strong black common stereotypes were likelier to perceive higher levels of psychological distress and require additional support structures. Psychological distress associated with gendered and racial discrimination can negatively impact mental health, influencing their ability to advance in the workplace (Chance, 2022; Fenerci et al., 2019).

In corporate settings, AAWs lean toward personal and community supports to mitigate the absence of corporate pathways for success (Smith et al., 2019; Yamaguchi &

Burge, 2019). Smith et al. (2018) conducted interviews with 59 AAWs within senior-level positions in U.S. corporations. The perceptions of AAW revealed various barriers and challenges to ascending within the workplace, such as lacking support, feelings of invisibility and being disregarded, poor mentorship, and microaggressions and racism. The AAW is the examined study that relied on support from other AAWs and their coping skills to mitigate challenges to career ascension (Smith et al., 2018). Yamaguchi and Burge (2019) corroborated the work of Smith et al. (2018) by interviewing 93 AAWs in computing fields across the United States. The ability to advance was primarily reported as related to their organizational and personal accountability. Externally, AAW relied upon educational and cultural support received throughout their lifetime. According to Smith et al. (2018) and Yamaguchi and Burge (2019), the inability of organizations to appropriately support AAW, foster equality, and create appropriate pathways to success are central barriers that lead to a reliance on community and personal support rather than organizational guidance.

### **Effects of Racism and Sexism**

Black female leaders experiencing the complexities of navigating sexism and racism must also assume the responsibilities inherent to career advancement regardless of the challenges inherent to their dual identities (Bruce-Golding, 2020). According to Bruce-Golding (2020), the positionality of Black women in leadership requires consideration of historically gendered and racialized systems and structures within which Black women operate. In tandem, Black feminists, such as Curtis (2017), argued for lack of literature that poorly and largely ignores Black women's unique experiences and

voices. Moreover, Black female leaders continue to face gendered and racialized challenges that limit their ability to do their jobs (Bruce-Golding, 2020; Curtis, 2017).

The retention of AAWs is a critical issue predominantly White institutions face when considering the effectiveness of their inclusivity measures (Kelly et al., 2021; Mayer, 2017). Using a qualitative research method, Kelly et al. (2021) identified a population of 16 AAW employees in higher education. Kelly et al. (2021) identified a high turnover rate specific to the AAW interviewed within the study. Additionally, AAW identified microaggressions, overt racism, and lacking inclusivity, ultimately increasing their turnover intentions. Mayer (2017) also explored AAW perception incorporating fields regarding experiences in South African higher education institutions. A population of 16 AAWs indicated that commitment among staff members was reduced due to a lack of support, poor representation of Black leaders, and a general inability to support AAWs in the workforce compared to their white peers. The findings of Kelly et al. (2021) and Mayer (2017) show that turnover is an imperative issue and cause of lacking inclusivity and support of an AAW within fields such as higher education.

### ***Psychological Challenges***

Career advancement is partially impacted by the individual psychological capabilities or the barriers that prevent their self-efficacy and belief in advancement capabilities (Bibi & Afsar, 2018; Chambers et al., 2020). Bibi and Afsar (2018) examined factors that created a practical outcome for employee satisfaction advancement. Specifically, motivation factors were examined, and power, behavior, and performance were assessed. Using a sample of 337 employees and immediate supervisors specific to

the automotive industry, Bibi, and Afsar (2018) identified that communication between staff identified an effective, innovative work performance. In addition, Bibi, and Afsar (2018) identified that quality within the workplace affects morale, opportunities, and competence. The same findings are evident when examining the experiences of Black women, of which Chambers et al. (2020) identified that inequality in the workplace influenced the psychological power of Black women in terms of their ability to advance themselves throughout their careers. The research findings of Chambers et al. (2020) and Bibi and Afsar (2018) further emphasize the unique influence of systematic racism concerning the career advancement of AAW, which affects women's psychological and social capital.

Although AAW leaders are more visible in leadership positions, the challenges required to ascend to the corporate structure are more complex than their White peers (Carter & Rossi, 2019; Davis, 2016; Elias, 2018; Lopez, 2020). According to Davis (2016), AAW displays more important independence characteristics and traditions of autonomy in the workplace; however, these biases did not translate to the accessibility of managerial positions. Evidence shows that when AAWs transition into leadership roles within white spaces, tension increases due to cultural misunderstandings, attempts to maintain power, or undermining decision-making (Bruce-Golding, 2020). Lopez (2020) also argued that AAW leaders would likely have their knowledge challenged. In certain instances, they feel like their access to their leadership positions was rooted in affirmative action and not based on their knowledge, skills, and competence. As a result, for many AAWs, navigating racial and gendered Black female leadership is often characterized by

a sense of materiality, community leadership, and an emphasis on strength. When combined, these strengths contribute heavily to the strong Black woman phenomenon (SBWP), which Carter and Rossi (2019) argued was often detrimental to the psychological health of AAW.

Additionally, such strengths contributed to stereotypes among White communities (Carter & Rossi, 2019). A result of harmful stereotypes, such as SBWP, is an increase in psychological difficulties, such as the imposter phenomenon, in which a successful AAW may feel incompetent or incapable due to the reflections of a society that inherently ignores or undervalues their contribution (Bravata et al., 2019; Clance & Imes, 1978). Various stereotypes and overt racism affect AAWs and decrease their motivation, confidence, and self-efficacy to move into career advancement opportunities (Bernard et al., 2020).

The SBWP influences the psychological health of AAWs and creates an unachievable standard in which they must be resilient against all changes and problems (Erskine et al., 2021; Ferdinand, 2016; Freeman, 2017). Ferdinand (2016) produced an autoethnographic review regarding her struggles with the stereotype of the strong Black woman. As a Black woman, she noted that the strong Black woman stereotype was commonly experienced in professional and personal circles. She also noted that, at times, she would employ this stereotype to overcome microaggressions and racism in the workplace and her social circle (Ferdinand, 2016). According to Erskine et al. (2021), the SBWP is rampant throughout the media, influencing young AAWs to manage challenges without allowing room for their mental and physical health. Freeman (2017), employing



data from phenomenological interviews with thirty-one Black women regarding their perceptions of stereotypes and their impact on their health and mental standing, identified that gendered and racial stereotypes foster stress and undermine their ability to achieve professionally and personally. Gendered and racial stereotypes, such as the SBWP, demonstrate the complexity of socio-cultural factors that face AAW in their pursuit of success (Erskine et al., 2021; Ferdinand, 2016; Freeman, 2017).

Although AAWs are visible in leadership positions, the challenges they must overcome to get there are often more complex than those of their colleagues (Hall, 2018; Mainah & Perkins, 2015). The historical structures of racism continue to be embedded within the Western educational system, and these structures draw on negative societal representations that appear fixed (Spates et al., 2020; Stockfelt, 2018). Factors such as political and social climate exacerbate these negative stereotypes by continuously reinforcing Whiteness and White supremacy (Bruce-Golding, 2020; Howell et al., 2016). According to Davis (2016), AAW had more robust independence characteristics and traditions of autonomy in the workplace; however, these biases did not translate to the accessibility of managerial positions. Evidence shows that when Black or minority staff transition into leadership roles within white spaces, there is a likelihood for tensions to occur and for relationships to change (Bruce-Golding, 2020). Thus, AAW faces internal challenges from peers and co-workers that further exacerbate the challenges of ascending to leadership roles (Spates et al., 2020; Stockfelt, 2018).

### ***Racism***

Experiences of racism, microaggressions, and oppression are rampant in corporate settings for AAW (Bernard et al., 2020; Cain, 2015). Bernard et al. (2020) performed a qualitative examination of the lived experiences of 21 AAWs within corporate Canada. The interviews focused on individuals qualified to hold an executive leadership position in Canada. Interviews with AAW identified experiences ranging from oppression, stereotyping, racism, and discrimination (Bernard et al., 2020). Women reported that these experiences led to their inability to obtain career advancement and produce confidence and self-efficacy (Bernard et al., 2020). In response to oppression and racism in the workplace, Cain (2015) reviewed strategies used by executive-level AAWs for career advancement purposes. According to the qualitative and phenomenological examination of 28 AAWs executives, social support amongst other women and communities of color was critical to their ability to overcome internal racism and lacking diversity that inhibited the career advancement of how many AAWs (Cain, 2015). The examinations of Cain (2015) and Bernard et al. (2020) indicate continued issues of oppression and discrimination, which has created a framework for relying on other women rather than upholding the standards that corporate America must ideally support based upon legal affirmations to support inclusivity of AAW.

Researchers demonstrated that stress underpins the workplace atmosphere for many AAWs (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2009; Norman et al., 201). Jones and Shorter-Gooden (2009) discussed the historical, societal, and cultural expectations presented for Black women in the United States through a sample of thirty-three interviews with AAW

in the United States. According to Jones and Shorter-Gooden (2009), AAWs face different experiences due to discrimination based on both gender and race. Norman et al. (2018), similarly to Jones and Shorter-Gooden (2009), argued that AAWs are often likely to use personal coping strategies, such as family, community, and religion, to protect themselves against the systems of racism that affect their workplaces, organizational culture, and opportunities for promotion. Nevertheless, structural racism has long impacted various institutes across the United States. The reflections expressed in these empirical studies further provide a lens through which to view the experiences of microaggressions, racism, and discrimination that create the concrete ceiling for AAW in the corporate spheres (Beckett, 2020; Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2009; Norman et al., 2018).

### ***Job Satisfaction***

Job satisfaction is one condition that may aid, or hinder, AAWs ability to achieve future career advancement positions (Bristol, 2020; Farinde-Wu & Fitchett, 2018). Farinde-Wu and Fitchett (2018) examined job satisfaction, teacher retention, school building climate, and student achievement data. Data were drawn from the 2007-2008 Schools and Staffing Survey and information about Black female teachers' job satisfaction. The data illustrated that job satisfaction in urban, non-charter schools was likelier to report increased job satisfaction. Additionally, receiving support, positive student behaviors, and teaching commitment aided AAWs satisfaction in the school environment (Farinde-Wu & Fitchett, 2018). Although, according to Bristol (2020), job satisfaction depends on internal and external factors, Black teachers are more likely to

experience increased turnover intention in educational environments that do not produce potential promotion opportunities, support, and satisfaction. Though not a central focus of this literature review of AAW, job satisfaction may contribute to the challenges faced in advancing in the workplace (Bristol, 2020; Farinde-Wu & Fitchett, 2018).

### ***Identity Challenges***

African American women are more likely to experience adverse outcomes associated with the intersecting and complex gendered and racialized role expectations (Burton et al., 2020). Bruce-Golding (2020) stated that AAW leaders often face microaggressions from their subordinate colleagues. The AAW leader must rationalize which disputes, either based on sexism or discrimination, to address or accept to achieve leadership roles (Bruce-Golding, 2020). The double jeopardy of being a woman and being Black describes how women are punished for not conforming to Black men's and non-Black women's stereotypical social roles (Burton et al., 2020). AAW leaders are also likely to have their knowledge challenged and, in certain instances, are made to feel like their access to their leadership positions was rooted in affirmative action and not based on their knowledge, skills, and competence (Lopez, 2020).

The portrayal of AAW in popular media, often in entry-level or maternal positions, plays a role in hindering the psychosocial ability of AAW to succeed (Curtis & Showunmi, 2019; Toms-Anthony, 2018). Toms-Anthony (2018) discussed the portrayal of Black women within popular media using the popular TV show *How to Get Away with Murder*, which premiered in 2013 and received acclaim across multiple audiences. Toms-Anthony (2018) argued that the lead character, a Black female criminal defense attorney,

relied heavily on stereotypical depictions of AAW interactions with other women, other AAWs, and professional colleagues. Toms-Anthony (2018) emphasized that previous racist characteristics of the AAW, such as Jezebel, the Mammy, and the angry Black women when continually infused within media prevent young AAW from envisioning themselves as leaders. Further, Curtis and Showunmi (2019) argued that the absence of leadership characters of AAW in media also bolsters the normalization of unfavorable organizational climates that result in hiding or ignoring the capabilities of AAW. The reflections specific to AAW depiction in media ultimately demonstrate a societal trend of preventing, both overtly and subvert, AAW from achieving successful corporate leadership roles (Curtis & Showunmi, 2019; Toms-Anthony, 2018).

Some AAWs, working in predominantly white workplaces are faced with the need to change and hide their identities to assimilate into the dominant work environment (Dickens & Chavez, 2018; Porter et al., 2020). Porter et al. (2020) examined four AAWs' narratives regarding their experiences serving as full-time contingent faculty members. The participant reported the following themes (a) marginalization of contingent faculty, (b) intersections of identities inextricably linked to teaching, and (c) devaluation of scholarly pursuits, which Porter et al. (2020) argued requires a closer examination of the experiences of AAW to overcome the institutional challenges experienced in the workplace. The experiences of AAW reported by Porter et al. (2020) and Dickens and Chavez (2018) examined AAW working in predominantly White environments using ten semi-structured interviews and interpretative phenomenological analysis. The findings demonstrated the need to shift one's identity, the difficulty of assimilating into dominant

cultures, confronting and dismantling stereotypes, and the high costs of changing their personality to fit with a predominantly White environment. Furthermore, the costly effect of attempting to hide one's racial identity potentially creates additional barriers associated with career advancement among AAWs (Dickens & Chavez, 2018; Porter et al., 2020).

The glass cliff faced by women in the workplace is predominantly more difficult for AAW due to the multiple identities they navigate daily (Glass & Cook, 2020a). Glass and Cook (2020b) examined semi-structured interviews with 33 AAW senior leads in various corporate settings in the United States. Glass and Cook (2020a) reported that the social price of rising to leadership was substantial for women of color. For some women, barriers, and challenges were based on racial and gendered stereotypes, a need to shift or downplay identity and personality, and high-ended visibility or invisibility (Glass & Cook, 2020a). Glass and Cook (2020b) performed a similar examination of the social price of gendered and racial discrimination through reviewing panel data from S&P 500 U.S. firms between 2010-2015. And outcomes amongst corporate diversity misconduct. The findings illustrated that female-led companies are less likely to face discrimination lawsuits and experience high-diversity rating experiences. Ultimately, these findings illustrate that excluding female-led workplaces can potentially include a continued landscape of harassment and exclusion, exacerbated for AAW (Glass & Cook, 2020a).

Leadership positions are often erroneously characterized by a patriarchal ideology of strength that inherently excludes AAW (Cirincione-Ulezi, 2020; Sales et al., 2019). Sales et al. (2019) examined a semi-qualitative approach using data from 12 interviews

with AAWs. The findings indicated that AAWs are likely to experience differential experiences with support, ranging from empowerment from some coworkers to being overlooked, marginalized, undervalued, and unappreciated in their professions as leaders due to their dual minority status (Sales et al., 2019). Cirincione-Ulezi (2020) argued that identifying barriers to AAW leadership inclusion has provided researchers with sufficient information to understand the systematic issues of marginalization and racism. However, overcoming such barriers and implementing truly inclusive approaches require further understanding of the experiences of AAWs in terms of career pursuit and failure (Cirincione-Ulezi, 2020), which this study will address.

### **Absence of Inclusivity Standards**

The deprivation of promotional positions for AAW in executive-level positions is often due to lacking standards for inclusivity and diversity among American corporations (Barron, 2019; Beckwith et al., 2016). Beckwith et al. (2016) noted that barriers experienced by AAW include the deprivation of promotional opportunities for executive-level positions. The inability of Black women to advance to executive positions further increases economic and social disparities amongst Black communities (Beckwith et al., 2016). Barron (2019) similarly assessed AAWs' perception of work experiences. A qualitative approach was used to examine AAW experiences regarding career advancement among senior-level opportunities. Twelve corporations revealed barriers and challenges to diversity inclusion standards, such as poor implementation and lack of inclusivity of AAW within standard initiatives (Barron, 2019). Organizational ineptitude toward providing equality and inclusivity standards reduces advancement opportunities

and increases reliance on social and personal standards amongst AAW (Barron, 2019; Beckwith et al., 2016).

Multiple barriers affect AAWs' ability to gain leadership positions (Greene, 2019; Hideg et al., 2019). Greene (2019), using a transcendental phenomenological study, examined AAW in executive-level positions within Fortune 500 companies. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to examine barriers and challenges experienced by AAW. Greene (2019) indicated that limitations to advancement were corporate policies that reduced diversity and overall supported the repression of AAW concerning achieving career advancement. However, such as mentoring, practical approaches can allow AAW to overcome barriers and obtain executive positions. In tandem with Greene (2019) and Hideg et al. (2019), an examination of the underrepresentation of women in leadership roles identified that lacking policies for inclusivity and diversity ultimately underpin oppression and systems of inequality that prevent women's career advancement. Ultimately, barriers affecting AAW can prevent career advancement and reduce inclusivity and diversity within corporate America (Greene, 2019; Hideg et al., 2019).

The visibility of AAW in the corporate setting can potentially influence the likelihood of exposure to discrimination and decreased support structures (Katz et al., 2018; McCluney & Rabelo, 2019). McCluney and Rabelo (2019) examined the experiences of AAW regarding belongingness and distinctiveness within the workplace. The factors of belongingness and distinctiveness were considered essential characteristics in terms of the experiences of AAW in the workplace, specifically through how the condition of precarious visibility, invisibility, hypervisibility, and partial visibility was



experienced in the workplace AAW. McCluney and Rabelo (2019) argued that there is a need to examine the experiences of AAW with a specific focus on how visibility, belongingness, and distinctiveness are experienced in the workplace. Katz et al. (2018) also examined data regarding the informal networks of both senior woman administrators (SWAs) and athletic directors (ADs) within National Collegiate Athletic Association Division I institutions. According to Katz et al. (2018), the barriers to women achieving leadership positions include poor support within the institution and heightened visibility within internal mentorship networks. Both McCluney and Rabelo (2019) and Katz et al. (2018) revealed the need for examining the experiences of AAW to more closely reveal how experiences within corporate and leadership settings change.

### **Summary and Conclusions**

In the U.S., AAWs are underrepresented in corporate leadership, CEO, and other executive positions (Carter & Peters, 2016; Sawyer, 2017). In this literature review, I thoroughly discussed GCT and IT. I presented a discussion of structural racism, focusing on inherent barriers and challenges within business settings to reduce the success of AAWs. I also discussed current statistics relevant to gender and racial diversity within corporate structures. Data indicates a decrease in diversity across almost all corporate structures despite legal precedence for improving the representation of women in leadership positions (Agyeiwaa & Attom, 2018; Brown et al., 2017; Sawyer, 2017; Whitaker, 2019; Yeh, 2018).

I focused on psychological and professional challenges experienced by AAWs in terms of career advancement, which is often hindered due to a lack of self-efficacy

cultivated due to the absence of diversity-based inclusion programs within corporate structures. Further, media portrayals that lack representation of Black women in leadership roles and include stereotypes served to further decrease the confidence of AAWs in terms of pursuing and succeeding in leadership positions (Bristol, 2020; Farinde-Wu & Fitchett, 2018).

The organizational climate also affects the ability of AAWs to succeed. Racism, microaggressions, and depression are rampant in corporate settings, which undermine the ability of AAWs to succeed in executive leadership positions in the corporate workforce (Bernard et al., 2020; Cain, 2015; Kelly et al., 2021; Mayer, 2017). The literature review indicated a gap regarding the experiences of AAWs. There is a lack of literature regarding experiences and barriers regarding executive-level advancement in the business services industry. Based on the literature review, the problem was that AAWs have remained underrepresented in CEO and other such executive positions. The purpose of the phenomenological study was to understand lived experiences of AAWs when they apply for and fail to reach executive positions in this industry. In Chapter 3, I present the research design and methodology. I also discuss the guiding methodology, sample, and population desired to address the purpose of the study.

### Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of the phenomenological study was to develop an understanding of lived experiences of AAWs when they apply for and fail to reach executive positions in the business services industry. My study examined the journeys of those aspiring to reach but did not currently hold executive-level jobs. I sought to expand on the current body of knowledge and increase awareness of how AAWs perceived their experiences when reaching the concrete ceiling as they attempted to advance to executive levels in their corporate jobs. Further, I examined factors that assist leadership decisions and overall employment policies in corporate America that impact the failure to attain executive positions.

Chapter 3 includes an explanation of the methodology and research design that was used for the proposed study. The chapter begins with the research design and rationale. I used a qualitative phenomenological method to understand lived experiences of AAWs. Chapter 3 also includes my role as the researcher and my responsibilities. Participant selection logic and a description of how participants were selected via purposive sampling are addressed. Instrumentation for the study and data collection procedures are discussed. Data analysis procedures are described, including thematic analysis. The chapter concludes with a discussion of trustworthiness and ethical considerations.

#### **Research Questions, Design, and Rationale**

The following research questions were developed based on the study's problem, purpose, and theoretical foundations. These research questions guided me in developing interview questions.

RQ1: What meaning do AAWs make concerning their race and gender experiences during attempts to advance their careers?

RQ1a: How do AAWs understand the role race plays in their lived experiences when applying for executive positions in the business services industry?

RQ1b: How do AAWs understand the role gender plays in their lived experiences when applying for executive positions in the business services industry?

RQ1c: How do AAWs understand the role race and gender plays in their living experiences after being passed over for a higher position?

RQ2: How do AAWs describe barriers they face when attempting to advance in corporate America?

The central phenomenon under investigation in this research was lived experiences of AAWs involving barriers to succession as managers in corporate settings. As a result, AAWs experience greater difficulty attaining executive roles in corporate settings. I explored lived experiences of women who have experienced these barriers. I used the qualitative research design because it involves gaining insights from participants with lived experiences related to the problem under study. Therefore, a qualitative phenomenological research method and design were most appropriate for this study.

### **Role of the Researcher**

As the researcher in this qualitative study, I was a data collection instrument. I was responsible for interacting with participants to motivate responses through interview questions. Interviewers in semi-structured interviews are responsible for coming up with follow-up questions to ask during the interview process. I did not have personal or professional relationships with participants. I did not have prior contact with participants beyond delivering informed consent forms. In this study, I did have some biases, such as my identity, which were mitigated. A reflexivity journal was used to manage bias. I kept a reflexivity journal and recorded follow-up questions for review to assess how bias influenced follow-up questions.

### **Methodology**

#### **Participant Selection Logic**

I used purposive sampling to recruit the sample from a population of AAWs. The targeted population was AAWs who work in corporate settings. For participant selection, volunteers needed to be AAWs, work in a corporate setting with managerial responsibilities, and have worked in this setting for more than one year. These criteria were sent to User Interviews, the platform used to gain access to participants.

I used purposive sampling to select a predefined number of participants using saturation to determine the necessary sample size for sufficiently evaluating collected data and answering research questions. Saturation is when no additional data are extracted from the data collection process (Saunders et al., 2018). When participants repeat similar ideas, they are considered *saturated* (Vasileiou et al., 2018). In this context,

I recruited 20 participants for this phenomenological study. However, only 12 individuals volunteered and met the eligibility criteria.

### **Instrumentation**

As the proposed research included a qualitative methodology, I was the primary instrument in this study. Researchers in prior scholarly articles have noted the role of the researcher as the primary instrument of data collection in qualitative research (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Clark & Veale, 2018; Jackson et al., 2007). I am an instrument in qualitative research because they must rely on me as a tool to obtain data through observation and interaction with the environment under investigation (Jackson et al., 2007). I must also be prepared to make decisions in the environment during data collection to support making sense of the problem under investigation.

Additionally, I must be prepared to gain greater insight from the participants in semi-structured interview questions (see Appendix E) and by asking follow-up questions. This means I am a living instrument and must be prepared to react to the responses of interview participants with questions spurred by the description of their lived experience. The interviewer was motivated by the study's research problem and theoretical perspective and encouraged each participant to expand on their responses.

I used semi-structured, one-on-one, face-to-face interviews with twelve open-ended, researcher-developed questions. Each interview question was aligned with a research question, shown in Table 1.

**Table 1***Alignment of Interview Questions with Research Questions*

Research Question	Interview Question
RQ1 What meaning do AAWs make concerning their race and gender experiences during attempts to advance their careers?	I2. Discuss your experiences and perception of the fairness of career advancement in your current company. SQ1. How do you see your company advancing managers into executive positions regarding racial equality? SQ2. How do you see your company advancing managers into executive positions regarding gender equality?
RQ1a: How do AAWs understand the role race plays in their lived experiences when applying for executive positions in the business services industry?	I4. If you applied for an executive position in your current company, what type of assessment was given? SQ2. What was their race? I5. Please describe what role you feel your race has played in your career advancement. I10. Discuss your experiences working with individuals of another race who have advanced higher than you.
RQ1b: How do AAWs understand the role gender plays in their lived experiences when applying for executive positions in the business services industry?	I3. Have you ever been passed over for promotion or selection to a higher position? SQ1. If so, how did that feel? I4. If you applied for an executive position in your current company, what type of assessment was given? SQ1. How much do you attribute this decision to your gender? I9. Discuss your experiences working with men who have advanced higher than you.
RQ1c: How do AAWs understand the role race and gender play in their experiences after being passed over for a higher position?	I7. What role do you feel/believe gender has played in your career advancement? I8. What role do you feel/believe race has played in your career advancement?

RQ.2: How do AAW describe the barriers they face when attempting to advance in corporate America?

I1. As we begin our conversation, I'd like to know more about your career advancement experience. Please describe what it's like to apply for executive-level positions SQ1. Discuss your experience with applying for an executive position within your current organization. SQ2. Have you applied for an executive position at another organization? If so, explain that experience. SQ3. How were the two experiences different?

I6. What is your perception of what contributed to being passed over for advancement? SQ1. How much do you attribute this decision to your gender? SQ2. How much do you attribute this decision to your race?

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A preset interview protocol guided the interview process (see Appendix D). The protocol for semi-structured interviews included a checklist. The checklist consisted of the activities that were crucial to the successful completion of interviews. The items on the list included activities that I would need to complete before, during, and after the completion of each interview. For example, before interviews, I confirmed that they received a signed copy of the informed consent form, that the participant was familiar with the computer-mediated communication tool Zoom, and that they were confirmed to meet at the date and time of the interview. I reiterated that the participant could stop or leave the interview anytime if they felt uncomfortable or could not answer any question. Leaving or stopping the interview did not have any consequences for the participant, and all data collected to this point was destroyed. The prepared questions were an essential part of the interview protocol. Implementing the interview protocol as an instrument was critical for optimizing the interview experience. The use of multiple data sources helped increase the accuracy and confirmability of the study findings and conclusions



### **Procedures for Expert Panel and Field Study**

The interview protocol and questions were reviewed by an expert panel and through a field study. The expert panel consisted of three individuals who were not employed by Walden University but had experience in a corporate environment. First, I delivered the interview guide, protocol, the purpose of the study, and the research questions to the expert panel. Next, the experts reviewed the questions to establish if the interview questions aligned with the study's purpose and the research questions. Finally, the panel advised me if any changes were needed, emailing me, and allowing me to decide whether or not to make these changes.

A field study occurred after the panel returned the advice, and I addressed the changes. This field study allowed me to test the interview questions on live persons. Two participants (part of the participation group) who met the inclusion criteria sat for full interviews with me, recording the session and taking notes to determine if any questions were challenging or problematic for the participants. Further, the field testing aimed to ensure I was comfortable with the interview process. The field test aimed to gain experience interviewing and assess if the questions were appropriate for answering the research questions within the interview. The original interview questions were reviewed and revised, if necessary, after completing the field test. The data collected from these mock interviews were not used in the actual study; however, the data was transcribed and used to practice coding.

I used a reflexive journal and member checking to provide the trustworthiness of the collected data from the participant interviews. Braun and Clarke (2006) suggested

using a reflexivity journal to record follow-up questions to determine areas of potential bias during semi-structured interviews. Notes taken in the reflexivity journal were reviewed following data collection. Using a reflexive journal assisted me in preventing any bias in the interpretation of the findings. The threat of researcher bias was mitigated with this journal as it was noted if any bias was apparent.

### **Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection**

Recruiting began after the Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was received (see Appendix B). The procedures for recruitment were relatively limited. Recruiting entailed arranging for the website UserInterviews.com to locate potential participants for the study and arranging for a meeting at a specific date and time. The website was given a list of characteristics for inclusion and exclusion in this study. If UserInterview.com did not produce the needed number of participants, I would recruit from the Walden Research participation site, LinkedIn, then Facebook using a recruiting flyer (see Appendix A). Some characteristics included being an AAW and working in a corporate setting. The recruiting phase included offering a copy of the informed consent form (see Appendix C) for review and requesting that potential participants sign the form before participation in the study.

The informed consent form (Appendix C) was a primary principle on which the framework of protecting human subjects in research was built. This consent form was codified in law through 45 CFR 46 and 21 CFR 50 of the Code of Federal Regulations enacted in 2018 (Bazzano et al., 2021). All participants must sign and return the informed consent form (Appendix C) requesting permission to participate in the study.

Furthermore, I ensured that the interviewees understood the consent form before signing. The detailed informed consent form included a description of the study, the voluntary participation clause, and information on the anonymity of the results gathered from this study. The participants were not officially recruited until they signed and returned the informed consent form to me for this study.

Once I collected the informed consent, the participant was asked for the most convenient day and time they were available for the interview. Using an online platform called Zoom, a tool for computer-mediated communication, provided a safe environment for the interview. My primary concern was the participant's safety as there are continued areas highly infected with Covid-19. A Zoom conference call alleviated in-person face-to-face interaction concerns (Olliffe et al., 2021). Data was collected in the form of interview questions and follow-up question responses. The responses were collected as recorded audio data.

Once collected, the recorded audio was transcribed using a service for transcription offered by Zoom. The transcribed interviews were sent to the respective participant for member checking with a request for a return via email in the next 7 to 10 days. Member checking determined whether the transcribed interview responses were correct and represented the participant's words. Member checking is a process where the participant reviews the transcribed interview question answers to correct any falsehoods or misinterpreted information. Member checking strengthens the data since the participants, and I may look at the data with different eyes. At the end of each interview, I

asked the participant to review their respective transcript, which was emailed to them with a request to make any changes and return via email within 7-10 days.

The returned transcriptions were reviewed, with responses assigned to initial codes. I assigned initial codes to establish when the point of saturation was reached. Determining when the saturation point is achieved is critical in qualitative research because the point of saturation is where different responses from participants are redundant (Saunders et al., 2018). While the study has a pre-defined number of participants, 12 additional participants were sought if the point of saturation was not achieved. Following the semi-structured interviews, participants were contacted for member checking once the manuscript for the study was complete to confirm that the participants' words' interpretation was accurate.

### **Data Analysis Plan**

The data analysis plan was designed to support effective responses to the research questions of this study. The research questions included understanding AAWs' meaning of race and gender experiences and how AAWs cope with the concrete ceiling. In addition, interview data was connected to the three research questions as it supports gaining a deep insight from individuals concerning their own experiences.

I followed Braun and Clarke's six-step thematic analysis method, supplemented by Saldaña's coding strategies. NVivo version 12 was used as the study's computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software. NVivo version 12 is a program qualitative researchers use to improve the research process and outcomes. Where discrepant cases exist, the cases were explored further to support explaining how they were discrepant.

I first coded by hand the transcribed interview responses. This coding process incorporated what Saldaña (2015) called data sorting, categorizing, and coding significant points regarding collective ideas and issues. Braun and Clarke's six-step method is shown in Table 2, with Saldaña's coding strategies incorporated into the steps.

**Table 2**

*Braun and Clarke's Six Steps to Thematic Analysis*

Phase	Step	Description
Phase 1	Familiarize yourself with the data	The researcher read and reread transcripts and questionnaire answers several times. Familiarization with the data begins with the researcher immersing themselves in it by transcribing the interview and focus group discussion question answers. Next, the researcher will listen to the recorded interviews while reviewing the transcript allowing a grasp and comprehensive understanding of the content provided by the participants. All transcripts will be reviewed multiple times until the researcher knows and understands all participant responses.
Phase 2	Generate initial codes	Completed once the researcher is familiar with the data provided. The researcher will use multicolored highlighters and highlight code words from the transcripts that may assist in answering the research questions, showing which collected data is relational to the study. Natural patterns are observed with repetitive patterns of actions and consistencies established. The results will provide categories for themes. Results will be compared with the data analyzed using the NVivo version 12 software. A codebook will be produced with a short description depicting the actual name of the code used.
Phase 3	Search for themes	The meaningful data coded in the previous step will be sorted to determine themes. This step, called interpretive analysis, will extract the relevant data necessary to find the relationships between the codes, categories, subthemes, and themes. In qualitative research, a code summarizes data using a single word or a short phrase that evokes the essence of its meaning. Then the researcher will define and name the themes. Individual statements, underlined, circled, and highlighted key vocabulary, and looking between the lines for more significant themes being expressed were used to identify themes. Then, as needed, the researcher will re-organize the codes, remembering

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		that when re-organizing codes, the researcher will follow a created catalog of codes.
Phase 4	Review themes	The researcher must take the coded data that has been categorized and identified by themes and review these themes. Data within the themes should be cohesive and identifiable under the stated theme. After reviewing the data and associated themes, the researcher can modify and further develop the themes in phase three. Questions related to determining if the themes are coherent but distinct from each other include do the themes make sense with the data supporting the themes.
Phase 5	Define and name themes	The researcher will now refine each theme, providing meaning or defining each theme. The use of descriptive and engaging terms is applied here. In describing the theme, the researcher identifies the related themes matching a posed research question. Subthemes may be created at this level to provide more diversity and needed definitions within each theme.
Phase 6	Produce report	The last step is producing the report. In writing the report, the researcher will decide on the most meaningful themes found and establish how they contribute to understanding the findings. These findings associated with the overall topic of the study also assist in answering the posed research questions.

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Using the data analysis from the coded information and NVivo version 12, I applied data summary tables to help make the data easier to interpret. I kept a journal following essential points and individual participant quotes. The themes of the codes were modified, revised, or collapsed to consolidate the data so it was more manageable, with the coded data analyzed and summarized.

### **Issues of Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness includes four critical factors that support qualitative research's validity, reliability, and objectivity. Credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability influenced some of the characteristics of this study. Credibility is

associated with the truthfulness and accuracy of the findings (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Credibility is achieved in this study through research design characteristics such as member checking, saturation, reflexivity, and peer review. Member checking is a characteristic of Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis procedures. Saturation was practiced in the data collection process by continuing to interview until additional interviews would result in redundancy. Reflexivity was a part of this study, as Braun and Clarke (2006) suggested using a reflexivity journal to support data analysis by recording thoughts, feelings, and areas where possible bias could exist in data collection. Peer review was a part of this study, as the dissertation committee rigorously reviewed the manuscript. Transferability is the extent to which research findings can be applied in other contexts (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). The thick description supported the transferability of the findings. Dependability is the degree to which findings would be consistent if the research were repeated (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Dependability was achieved by maintaining an audit trail. The audit trail was achieved in this study by saving collected data for university faculty to access the data for five years. The data was saved on an encrypted USB drive for five years. Confirmability is the degree to which the findings are neutral (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Just as reflexivity supported the credibility of the study, reflexivity supported confirmability.

### **Ethical Procedures**

The ethical procedures for this study were designed to support the protection of human subjects participating in the study. While site authorization is typically sought following approval by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of Walden University, site

authorization was not sought until IRB approval (Appendix B) was obtained for the current study. Site authorization was only required when a researcher was interested in accessing human subjects concentrated in a specific site or organization. There was no need for site authorizations, as research participants were located using the UserInterviews.com platform. Human subjects included in the study were treated following the ethical principles described in the Belmont Report. The ethical principles described in the Belmont Report exist to support the safety of human subjects from exploitation by dangerous research methods or research methods that could put the health and well-being of human subjects at risk. Thus, the treatment of human subjects shall conform to the ethical principles of respect for persons, beneficence, and justice.

The ethical principles of the Belmont Report were supported in the study's design and how human subjects were located and treated in several ways. First, approval from the IRB of Walden University was obtained before seeking human subjects. Approval from IRB is essential because of the oversight that the university can hold over the study's design by approving the study before its implementation. Several ethical concerns were considered in the design of the procedures for data collection that were associated with the ethical principles described in the Belmont Report. Respect for persons was considered and became a part of the study by protecting participants' autonomy, treating participants with respect, and requiring informed consent before data collection.

Informed consent was obtained from participants by signature on the cover page of the informed consent form. Autonomy was protected in this study by allowing participants to exit the study at any time and to select the date and time for interviews.



Informed consent was designed to describe the study and its purpose. The methods for data collection respected participants by being truthful and lacking deception.

Beneficence was respected in the study by minimizing harm and risks of harm while maximizing benefits. Harm was minimized by avoiding questions that could harm participants psychologically. Benefits were maximized by publishing the findings of the research. Justice was achieved by the research design supporting equal benefits and costs for participants, as well as the potential for a positive social impact from the study's findings.

The treatment of data is another ethical concern that was addressed. Collected data included obscuring the names of participants. Participants were labeled P1, P2, and P3 until the final participant. The obscuring of the names of participants supported the confidentiality of participants. Collected data was stored in both text and audio form. The data was stored on an encrypted USB drive. The encrypted USB drive was saved in a locked filing cabinet for five years. Following the end of the five years, the encrypted USB drive will be removed from the cabinet, the data will be deleted, and the drive will be destroyed.

### **Summary**

Chapter 3 included the methodology and research design for the proposed study. The chapter began with an explanation of the research design and rationale. I used a qualitative phenomenological design to understand lived experiences of AAWs. The chapter also included my role as the researcher and my responsibilities for the study. The chapter also included a discussion of the methodology. First, participant selection logic

was addressed, describing how participants were selected via purposive sampling.

Instrumentation for the study included me and the interview protocol. Data collection was then discussed, and User Interviews were used as a platform to support data collection.

Data analysis procedures were also described, as well as thematic analysis. The chapter concluded with a discussion of trustworthiness and ethical considerations.

## Chapter 4: Findings

In the U.S., AAWs fail to achieve executive positions due to racist and systematic barriers which require being addressed to ensure equity and the ability of AAWs to achieve executive positions in corporate America (Bernard et al., 2020; McCormick-Huhn & Shields, 2021; Norman et al., 2018; Roberts et al., 2018). The purpose of this study was to develop an understanding of lived experiences of AAWs when they apply for and fail to reach executive positions in the business services industry. In Chapter 4, I discuss the study's findings as a result of thematic analysis procedures. I reviewed the development of codes, categories, and final themes. A detailed analysis of techniques and thematic analysis procedures is also discussed in this chapter. I followed Braun and Clarke's procedures and used NVivo 12 to organize associated codes, categories, and themes.

Data analysis procedures involve the development of 16 codes, eight categories, and four final themes. These three final themes were (a) challenges to career advancement via workplace barriers and biases, (b) failure to ascend due to discrimination of race and gender, and (c) barriers to success due to the glass ceiling. Chapter 4 concludes with a summary of the reviewed salient topics and the final four themes.

### **Thematic Analysis**

Interviews were conducted with 12 participants to develop an understanding of lived experiences of AAWs when they apply for and fail to reach executive positions in the business services industry. The thematic analysis involved reviewing and rereading

transcripts for familiarization (Braun & Clarke, 2016). I read and reread each interview twice to ensure familiarity before coding and thematic analysis. After this process, I completed code identification. Code identification involves tagging phrases or words with similar conceptual meanings and contexts involving the purpose of the study based on participants' experiences provided during the data collection process. In this section, code analysis and identified codes are discussed.

A total of 16 codes were identified through initial coding procedures. Each code was associated with a *tag* cross-referenced to the participant's specific quote. I completed coding procedures twice for each interview. I reviewed each transcript twice and coded concepts with similar values or contexts according to participants' reflections. Iterative coding was completed until no new codes were identified throughout the transcripts. Additionally, I ensured the absence of overlapping codes by completing two iterative code identification procedures. Ultimately, 24 (two for each interview) coding iterations were completed to ensure no overlapping codes or missing information were present. Final coding procedures resulted in 16 codes: barriers, feminism, work factors, stress factors, male domination, workplace bias, intersectionality, identity, glass ceiling, success, failure, race, gender, applying, career advancement, and policies. Table 3 demonstrates each of these codes.

**Table 3**

Codes, Direct Quotes, and Participant and Frequency Counts

Code Label	Example direct quote	Participant count	Frequency count
Barriers	P1 "...I left the organization because I felt there was no room for advancement, went to work for local government".	16	43
Feminism	P6 "...we are companies who highlight women's progression, etcetera. And they say that on the top level, but it is not trickling down...".	12	51
Work Factors	P12 "My performance was meaningless, and it was like I wasn't, and I thought I was...".		
Stress Factors	P12 "...there's that perception that if they help me, then they're only helping me because of that, not because of all the other experiences...because they don't wanna be seen as somebody who's Cherry picking people of color or women to help progress".	5	17
Male Domination	P8 "...that is when they brought a man in. He did not know much, but at the end of the day, women listen to him before they listen to me...".	21	78
Workplace Bias	P9 "I never thought I was genuinely considered, but I did it because I wanted to at least try".	16	42
Intersectionality	P10 "... there are real blocks, for you know, other women or men that are just as qualified".	19	36

Identity	P4 “I have to push harder rather than just being invited to the circle”.	16	29
Glass Ceiling	P5 “...you have not done enough. You are never gonna be able to do enough...”.	10	24
Success	P11 “... I look at this job as me, being the only African American female in the leadership position, a senior leadership position. So I feel like it's good because I'm being seen..”	4	12
Failure	P3 “ I'm becoming disenchanted. I'm considering doing another career change”.	23	14
Race	P11 “ I feel like it wouldn't be an issue if I were a different race. But because I am Black, like I have this extra barrier against me....”.	21	37
Gender	P7 “ Being Black women, and I think that you know sometimes the stereotypes about Black women get in our way as well”.	22	52
Applying	P5 “ I mean, from my perspective, it seems like everybody is more of an option before I'm an option....”.	23	61
Career Advancement	P1 “You think you're doing all the right steps, but it just doesn't seem enough....”.	12	29
Policies	P12 “I tried multiple times to hold executive roles, and each time I was taught, I was suggested that I would need additional requirements....”.	16	32

Participants discussed various lived experiences regarding success and failure regarding career advancement. P9 explained the difficulty of gaining success despite policies that inhibited their ability to ascend and said, “If you have the credentials again, you know you're dealing with politics within the organization”. Gender also played a crucial role for many participants. P11 said, “...sometimes the stereotypes about Black women get in our way too”. P12 said, “If I were a different race, it would not be an issue. But because I am Black, like I have this extra barrier against me”. Reflections from participants during initial coding allowed for substantial details, which contributed to the creation of categories involving combining codes.

### **Category Development**

Category development proceeded after the development of the initial sixteen codes. The decision rule identified for category development was a minimum of two codes per category. Categories were developed based on similar values or conceptual ideologies shared between codes. According to Braun and Clarke (2016), category development is essential to ensuring the theme development is based on the similarity of lived experiences based upon value, ideology, and phrasing. Following the recommendations of Braun and Clarke (2016), I combine codes into categories. For example, challenges to career advancement were created based on the combination of code policies and male domination. Table 4 discusses each category developed through code combination.

**Table 4 (Figure 2)***Combining Interview Codes into Interview Categories*

Category	Codes (from Table 2)	Definition	Participant count	Frequency count
Discrimination Against Race and Gender	Race	Race plays a critical factor in the ability of AAW women to advance.	8	30
	Gender	Gender also plays a role in the ability of an AAW to achieve equity and advancement in corporate America.	8	20
Workplace Barriers and Biases	Workplace Barriers	Various workplace barriers exist that inhibit AAW from advancing or achieving equity in the workplace.		
	Workplace Biases	Racist and gender biases in the workplace create bias among recruiters, leaders, and other employees towards AAW.		
The Glass Ceiling	Applying	The lived experiences of AAW demonstrate a continuum of failed applying experiences shaped by factors related to the glass ceiling.	8	17
	Glass Ceiling			
	Feminism	The glass ceiling, which poses as a concrete ceiling for AAW, is framed by barriers that prevent ascension or success.		
	Intersectionality	Feminism, though touted in some policies, is ineffective for raising the AAW 2 places of leadership.  Intersectionality is rarely employed in diversity initiatives but is inherent to the shared experience of AAW women and experiences with non-AAW women.		
Barriers to Success	Success	AAW's women seek success and find personal and, at times, workplace success; however,	7	12



Category	Codes (from Table 2)	Definition	Participant count	Frequency count
	Barriers	these experiences are framed by barriers and struggle.		
	Work Factors	AAWs face various barriers to success which are different from their peers and leaders		
	Stress Factors	Work factors are among the most substantial barriers that prevent AAWs from ascending to leadership and executive positions  The stress of associated barriers further challenges AAW's ascension to its executive positions and potential mental and physical well-being.		
Challenges to Career Advancement	Policies Male Domination	Policies are often ineffective or serve as further hinder meant to AAW's ascension to leadership positions  Leadership, at all levels, is dominated by male-based ideologies, both in terms of the physical positioning of men and a male-dominated patriarchal system of thoughts and policies, which are substantial barriers to AAWs.	8	12
Failure to Ascend	Failure Identity	The unique intersection of policies, the identity of AAW, and barriers lead to failure to ascend to executive positions. Ultimately combined experience with peers, leaders, and workplace biases inherent to discrimination against their identity prevent success among AAWs.		

The categories resulting from code combination include *discrimination against* race and gender, workplace barriers and biases, the glass ceiling, barriers to success, and challenges to career advancement. Participants reflected upon the role of race, gender, and policies in the workplace. Through participants' lived experiences, it was evident that

race and gender play a crucial role in hindering the advancement of AAW into the ascension of leadership roles. Specifically, the workplace barriers, biases, and male-dominated ideologies organizations capitalize on a predominantly White space, which ignores the value of AAW while upholding White dominated leadership ideologies and leaders. In addition, various strategies were inherent to the glass ceiling experienced by AAW, such as policies, workplace biases, male-dominated ideologies, and ineffective allyship from other women, specifically White women. Ultimately, barriers inherent to the organization and racial and gender stereotypes prevent AAWs from advancing to executive positions while retaining their labor and expertise. Based on the developed categories, I moved to theme development, discussed in the following section.

### **Theme Development from Categories**

After category development, I moved to theme identification following the recommendations of Braun and Clarke. Theme identification or development is based on combining categories with similar conceptual values. The decision rule used to develop themes included at least two categories per theme. Three themes were identified: challenges to career advancement via workplace barriers and biases, failure to ascend via discrimination against race and gender, and barriers to success via the glass ceiling. Table 5 demonstrates the final themes.

**Table 5***Final Themes, Definitions, and Participant and Frequency Count*

Theme	Categories (from Table 2)	Definition	Participant count	Frequency count
Challenges to Career Advancement <i>via</i> Workplace Barriers and Biases	Challenges to Career Advancement  Workplace Barriers and Biases	Workplace barriers and biases are significant challenges to career advancement among AAWs. Due to factors associated with male-dominated ideologies, biases, and overt and subverted racism, AAWs will experience critical challenges that may prevent them from succeeding in their advancement to executive positions.	8	63
Failure to Ascend <i>via</i> Discrimination Against Race and Gender	Failure  Identity	The failure to ascend to executive positions is framed by discrimination experienced against race and gender identities among AAW. These experiences, which include their gender and racial identity, are framed by biases in the workplace, which fail to support and inherently exploit the work of AAW.	8	37
Barriers to Success <i>via</i> the Glass Ceiling	Success Barriers Work Factors Stress Factors Applying Glass Ceiling Feminism	The glass ceiling is framed by lacking intersectional support from female peers, at times, other WOC, and various workplace barriers that ultimately hinder AAW's ability to ascend to leadership positions. Success, when gained, is often inherently associated with challenges and pushback that is not an inherent experience of non-AAW individuals.	8	61

Theme	Categories (from Table 2)	Definition	Participant count	Frequency count
	Intersectionality			

***Theme 1: Challenges to Career Advancement Due to Workplace Barriers and Biases***

The first theme was used to elucidate the experience of workplace barriers, biases, and career advancement challenges. Participants in this first theme explored the barriers and biases inherent to their careers, experiences, and interactions with peers and leaders. AAW discussed the various experiences that ultimately led to difficulty ascending to leadership positions. For example, P1 stated, “You think you're doing all the right steps, but it just doesn't seem enough”. While P12 argued, “Even if you have the credentials again, you know you're dealing with politics within the organization”. Further, P12 emphasized the struggle of gaining equity within career advancement while also feeling the inability to discuss racism and diversity with non-AAW leaders and said:

I'm like if I'm in a position that's too easy. I'm not working. I'm not feeling challenged. I'm not gonna stay. I didn't mention to him the whole diverse thing. I just because I felt like since he was like a white male. I feel like he probably wouldn't relate. You probably just be empathetic and say, Oh, I'm sorry. And all this stuff, so I didn't even say that to him.

Participants also discussed the difficulty of male-dominated workplaces, which ultimately favor men's physical placement and mental ideologies in various organizational contexts. For example, P12 stated, “...so instead of looking internally,

they've done things where they've brought in men from other well, I mean they brought in men who have applied externally". P5 noted, "That's when they brought a man in. He didn't know much, but at the end of the day, women listen to him before they listen to me..." P5 also identified male-orientated ideologies and activities for socialization:

It was very male-oriented, male-oriented activities, like if we, if they had, like an outing, it was surrounded by golf or going to sports games or sports tickets, and it was like going to hockey games, just or if we went to like we have gone.

Participants emphasized that the presence of male co-workers or leaders is not inherently an issue. However, the tendency to hire and center the experiences of White, often male, coworkers lead to the subversion of AAW's experiences and reliance on their labor without the proper advancement or pay. Notably, AAW pressed that they were passed over by white males or had negative experiences collaborating with them due to overt and subverted racism. P6 also emphasized the policies inherent to the organization can ultimately reduce racial equality and diversity while focusing on the importance of White feelings rather than exposing or addressing microaggressions in the workplace. P6 said:

I recently brought to the forefront to my executive my new executive director, a white woman. You know, I said we need to focus on racial equity in this organization because I see lots of microaggressions from you, and I don't think she knew how to receive that. But I encourage her to try this module or this program of modules, like educational modules, called whiteness at work.

However, participants emphasized that the policies and politics inherent to organizations and corporate America ultimately hinder advancement. P7 said, "Even if you have the

credentials again, you know you're dealing with politics within the organization". P9 said, "I tried multiple times to hold executive roles, and each time I was taught, I was suggested that I would need additional requirements". AAWs demonstrated that corporate America's inherent policies and male-dominated ideologies serve as significant barriers to advancement while enforcing biases and negatively stereotyped ideologies among non-AAW coworkers and leaders.

***Theme 2: Failure to Ascend via Discrimination in Terms of Race and Gender***

The second theme was used to demonstrate the challenges AAWs experience while overcoming failure to ascend to executive positions. Participants emphasized the difficulties surrounding discrimination against their race and gender identities based on workplace biases, racism, and microaggressions. Participants reviewed the difficulty they experienced in the workplace and the significant challenges in applying to positions. Firstly, identity plays a critical role in self-perception and others when considering the biases towards ascension. For example, P1 stated:

Sometimes, when people see my name, they assume a different race, and then in the interview, I could see them in their faces...I feel like I don't know if it's sometimes. I feel like it's kind of like once against me.

P8 argued, "It's very sad to be in a box where you can't move forward, but you know you have all the knowledge". P3 agreed, "I have to push harder rather than just being invited to the circle. P6 also felt that identity was a difficult role to manage in the workplace and said:

I was the top performing female and only African American in the teamwork, with all Caucasian men meeting with executive-level clients. These individuals were also white males v females so many times. I was the only African American person in the meeting. It's very challenging, and it is just. It's a cultural thing.

The role of gender and race played a role in terms of failure experience. While each unique experience varied according to the individual, a common theme occurred in terms of being overlooked for leadership positions due to a basis of others' experiences, lacking feedback towards their required advancements needed to apply to leadership positions, and overcoming microaggressions and overt racism. For example, P8 stated, "At my prior job, I have multiple times, and I got passed over by a less qualified person that I brain coming into the company that didn't have the credentials for the position". P9 said, "I'm becoming disenchanted. I'm considering doing another career change". Other participants felt that ideas were exploited in favor of other leaders and co-workers, such as P3, who said:

I have [a] one-on-one meetings with this particular director every week, and I give her, you know, just passing some of my ideas. Then she goes and presents it to the staff at like all staff as one of her ideas, and it's like you're welcome when she meets with me in private, like she's claiming the work that I like. So I've thought of the creative work and presented it as her own, and then told me like I did this for you.

In turn, the role of race was acknowledged by all participants as a significant barrier, to ascension, such as P12, who said:

I feel like my race has been, you know, something that lets them check a race quota box requirement. I feel like I've had to work twice as hard to prove myself and have proven myself in this field, but again I've hit that ceiling.

Like P12, P10 stated, "I feel like, if I were a different race, it wouldn't be an issue. But because I'm Black like I have this extra barrier against me". Gender plays a role for all participants when reflecting on failure, such as P1, who said, "Being Black women, and I think that you know sometimes the stereotypes about Black women get in our way as well". Participants also reflected that the role of a woman, and a Black woman, often led to being placed in positions focused on care or overlooked because of the potential for traditional roles such as family and child-rearing. P1 said: "There's already a preconceived notion in society that women are more emotional, and because they're more emotional, they can't make sound decisions."

P8 stated"

So, having a woman helped me get a job as a woman, as being a woman helped me stay in a job. So, I think it's having a certain level of eloquence and charm and being able to talk professionally, and the fact that I happen to be a woman doing it has helped.

The experience of identity, shaped by gender and racial roles and experiences, serves as the opportunity for change and a barrier to success. While being placed in positions that exploit AAW labor, women are also expected to perform in allegedly female-oriented roles or stereotypes towards Black women. If AAWs also attempt to overcome these roles, they face pushback or overt racism and microaggressions from



their non-AAW coworkers and leaders. Combined, each identity factor serves as a barrier to success due to the inherent racist ideologies and upholding of white supremacy in corporate America.

***Theme 3: Barriers to Success via the Glass Ceiling***

The third theme addressed the unique experiences of AAWs involving gaining success while experiencing barriers that ultimately lead to a glass ceiling. Participants discussed various barriers associated with personal work stress, application experiences, and the lack of intersectionality in the workplace. Experiences were also centered around the difficulty in gaining equity not only based upon distance equity from White male coworkers and leaders but also other WOC, but more significantly, White women. For example, P8 stated:

I've had success at a couple of those organizations and then sort of a stagnant pathway in the other. I think that's more because of the individual, a Caucasian woman who did not see or understand the importance of, you know, not only women will move ahead, but she did not understand the importance of just allowing. You know, people as a whole, I guess, to escalate and move forward in their positions.

While P12 said, "I left the organization because I felt there was no room for advancement, went to work for local government". P12 said, "Other cultures I've worked with, I think, for the most part, they understand the struggle of not being of the minority or the majority group". Participants also reflected that while some companies tout

progression of female progress, it is done apparently within the actual diversity and inclusion within the workplace. P4 said:

When I work for corporations to highlight, we are companies who highlight this, and we are companies who highlight women's progression, etcetera. And they say that on the top level, but it's not trickling down. It's not so. There's a lot of surface talk for some corporations where they're saying they're doing certain things, and maybe they have side profiles.

P12 also noted that in the workplace, feminism (as a supported ideology) was an apparent priority amongst workplace policies; however, the experiences of AAW demonstrated that some female leaders targeted AAW and failed to advance them regardless of their qualifications. P12 said:

My biracial superior, she was saying to me like, you know, if I had said like if I spoke up on something, she was saying things like, Oh, you're making yourself look like the angry black woman that which I guess she was trying to relate to me when she said that because you know the half of it is black, but in my mind as a dark-skinned woman, a like a lighter tone. So the woman telling me that in a place that is a corporate, a corporate environment like, yes, that kind of threw me off and hindered me.

Workplace policies and barriers existed that failed to provide feedback or indicate areas requiring advancement. P12 noted, "You have not done enough. You're never gonna be able to do enough". P7 said, "It made me kind of feel like I wasn't good enough at the time". P8 also corroborated the feelings of failure and barriers with friends and

said, “Because all of my girlfriends, all of us have advanced degrees, and not of us seem to be able to get any higher than where we are now”.

The experiences of AAW demonstrate multiple barriers inherent to the workplace, workers, and leaders. The identity of AAW or are there a subject of extreme focus, P11 stated, “...but again, if I were white, I think I would be in a higher position than I am now (P10)”. P1 emphasized, “They always want to throw the angry Black woman on you, or you know you're too outspoken, and things like that, and it's not even confrontational”. Ultimately, AAWs illustrated that regardless of their efforts, experiences, or degrees, they will encounter the glass ceiling or, more probably, the concrete ceiling, surrounded by inaccessibility, poor diversity, and lacking inclusion among coworkers, leaders, and corporate America as a system.

### **Summary**

In this chapter, I presented findings from thematic analysis. A total of 16 codes were identified via thematic analysis. Identified codes were grouped into eight categories, which resulted in four themes. The four themes were challenges to career advancement due to workplace barriers and biases, failure to ascend due to discrimination in terms of race and gender, and barriers to success involving the glass ceiling. In Chapter 4, I discussed themes, their implications, and participant quotes to emphasize lived experiences of AAWs who contributed information to the study. In Chapter 5, I discuss the implications of results with consideration of peer-reviewed literature. Finally, a detailed discussion of recommendations based on thematic analysis is discussed.

## Chapter 5: Interpretation of Findings

AAWs are more likely to face substantial challenges than their White counterparts due to discrimination in terms of racial and gender identities (Atewologun, 2018; Coles & Pasek, 2020; Settles et al., 2020). As a result, AAWs fail to achieve executive positions due to internal and external factors (Beckwith et al., 2016; Bibi & Afsar, 2018; Greene, 2019; Harris & Lieberman, 2015). This study aimed to develop an understanding of lived experiences of AAWs when they apply for and fail to reach executive positions in the business services industry. Addressing this topic was critical to providing information that can address racist and systematic barriers that exist and challenge the ability of AAWs to gain executive positions across corporate America. The following research questions were used to address the purpose of the study and gain information directly from participants through semi-structured interviews:

RQ1: What meaning do AAWs make concerning their race and gender experiences during attempts to advance their careers?

RQ1a: How do AAWs understand the role race plays in their lived experiences when applying for executive positions in the business services industry?

RQ1b: How do AAWs understand the role gender plays in their lived experiences when applying for executive positions in the business services industry?

RQ1c: How do AAWs understand the role race and gender play in their experiences after being passed over for a higher position?

RQ2: How do AAWs describe the barriers they face when attempting to advance in corporate America?

Chapter 4 addressed research findings, participant quotes, and procedures used to analyze textual information thematically. In Chapter 5, I discuss the implications of the findings discussed in Chapter 4. Empirical research from Chapter 2 is discussed concerning research findings. Additionally, recommendations for research and practice are supplied. A summary of the findings concludes the chapter.

### **Interpretation of Findings with Empirical and Theoretical Research**

Thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews with 12 AAWs revealed three qualitative themes: challenges to career Advancement due to workplace barriers and biases, failure to ascend due to discrimination in terms of race and gender, and barriers to success involving the glass ceiling. These three themes were used to address the proposed research questions and the purpose of the study. I discuss research findings, theoretical frameworks, and research questions in the following sections.

#### **Theme 1: Challenges to Career Advancement Due to Workplace Barriers and Biases**

The first theme included challenges AAWs experience in seeking career equity and advancement in corporate America. Theme 1 was also used to address RQ2. Data illustrated lived experiences of AAWs involving workplace barriers and biases. Participants explained the challenges they faced when attempting to advance in their careers. A variety of both internal and external barriers were present. For example, male-dominated ideologies, racist biases, and microaggressions in the workplace led to critical challenges preventing them from succeeding in terms of advancement to executive positions.

Participants also expressed the issues with male-dominated ideologies throughout the workplace. They expressed they were passed over by under or less-qualified male White coworkers. Data indicates these challenges prevented them from succeeding in executive positions. Findings of this study expand upon previous empirical literature by demonstrating specific incidences of exclusion and racism that led AAWs to fail to achieve executive positions despite their qualifications and expertise. Furthermore, lacking inclusivity and belongingness in the workplace may further hinder AAWs from seeking executive positions.

Findings demonstrate various workplace barriers and biases that challenge career advancement among AAWs. In terms of the GCT, the experiences of AAWs differ from their White counterparts due to the experiences of discrimination based on gender and racial identity in the workplace. For example, AAW reported experiences of male-dominated ideologies, preference for male ideas over their own, and being passed up for less qualified or underqualified male coworkers. Furthermore, findings demonstrate that biases and barriers exist among both male and female coworkers. These findings further expand upon the GCT and understanding and experiences of AAWs which are unique, varied, and affected by systems that inherently exploit their labor while mitigating their ability to serve in executive positions.

### **Theme 2: Failure to Ascend Due to Discrimination in Terms of Race and Gender**

Participants discussed their experiences as AAWs and how race and gender identity increased the likelihood of harassment, racism, microaggressions, and inability to achieve the same executive positions as their White coworkers. Participants expressed

that their experiences as AAWs prevented them from gaining equity or achieving executive positions. AAWs are less likely to find a sense of equity in corporate America settings based on their racial and gender identities (Bernard et al., 2020; Cain, 2015; Kelly et al., 2021; Mayer, 2017). Additionally, characteristics of failing to ascend included lack of feedback from recruiters, clarity on required expertise, or continued recommendations to gain further training without clarifications on what an appropriate amount of training would be to ascend to executive positions. Research also indicates that a common tactic used to inhibit the progress of an AAW is lacking feedback, poor communication, or providing unclear guidance on potential strategies for ascending without supporting the progress of the same women (Chambers et al., 2020; Randolph et al., 2020; Scott et al., 2019).

Participants emphasize that their racial and gender identities were factors of substantial barriers to gaining equity in the workplace. The experiences of AAW in this study demonstrated continued issues with discrimination and harassment, as well as lacking support structures to ensure exceptions to executive positions. Researchers emphasized a need to understand belongingness, visibility, and the effectiveness of inclusivity and diversity structures in corporate America (Katz et al., 2018; McCluney & Rabelo, 2019). Research participants expressed that inclusivity measures often increase visibility, but negatively so they are the center of attention without potential benefits such as ascension to executive positions.

Participants highlighted that they were likely to be held back not only because of their race but also because of their intersecting gender and racial identities. In many

cases, participants expressed that they were either expected to act a specific way, follow stereotypes of the angry Black woman, or were also expected to be devoted and caring presences in the office space to align with gender stereotypes. Research, such as Toms-Anthony (2018), indicated that stereotypes from TV and movies increase racist characteristics and stereotypes and the risk of harassment in the workplace. As a result, AAW lacks the potential for equity while experiencing stereotyping and racism from coworkers and leaders. Based on the experiences of women expressed in the study, corporate policies and strategies are ineffective in supporting the ascension of AAW (Greene, 2019; Hideg et al., 2019). However, the study does elucidate potential opportunities for change, such as supplying clear feedback, reviewing policy structures for ascension, and assessing candidate promotion techniques, to ensure the most appropriately equipped and skilled employees are promoted to positions. The implications of these findings in research and practice are discussed in the following subsections of Chapter 5.

The second theme also holds implications for the theoretical framework of the study. In alignment with IT theory, participants expressed that harassment and discrimination were based not only on their race but an intersection between gender and race identities. Ultimately, these exact expectations were not present for their male and female coworkers. While participants expressed that all women struggled to gain equity, AAW indicated that their gender and racial identities would be an additional barrier to equity and ascension to executive positions. These findings align with the GCT theory, which demonstrates the eventual glass ceiling that women will face in corporate America



(Atewologun, 2018; Coles & Pasek, 2020; Heard et al., 2020). However, the findings of lived experiences expressed by AAW demonstrate that the ceiling for Black women is more likely to be *concrete*, without opportunities for advancement and continued exploitation of their expertise and skills.

### **Theme 3: Barriers to Success via the Glass Ceiling**

The third theme, *Barriers to Success via the Glass Ceiling*, illustrated the barriers to success that AAW experience when attempting to gain executive positions.

Information from the third theme also addressed research question two, regarding the barriers AAW faces when attempting to advance in corporate America. The lived experiences expressed by participants relevant to this theme demonstrated that the AAW would ultimately reach a glass, or even an impenetrable concrete, ceiling that prevents their ability to advance into executive positions. A variety of barriers within the workplace, associated with prejudice towards their gender and racial identity and the inability to gain allyship from others in the workplace, lead to significant barriers and painful experiences.

In the third theme, participants discussed various barriers that ultimately led them to meet the glass ceiling when attempting to gain executive positions. In empirical research, barriers are a common topic that spans internal and external factors associated with the workplace and poor and practical inclusivity standards (Cirincione-Ulezi, 2020; Sales et al., 2019). Among these were work factors, such as discrimination or bias from coworkers. Researchers indicated that allyship between other coworkers is central to rewards improving policies, addressing lacking leadership positions, and ensuring a sense

of belongingness in the workplace (Dickens & Chavez, 2018; Porter et al., 2020).

However, data from this study demonstrates that belongingness and visibility are two factors that AAW experience, but they are neither effective nor positive.

Other factors included leadership that failed to accept their expertise, did not supply feedback, and faced harassment based on their racial and gender identity.

Researchers demonstrated that harassment, discrimination, and racism are common for AAWs. However, ideally, policies fostering positive work climates and diversity initiatives address such issues. Yet AAW indicated that initiatives often increase visibility in the workplace but do not increase access to training, expertise, or opportunities to gain executive positions (Chambers et al., 2020; Randolph et al., 2020; Scott et al., 2019).

Ultimately, stress increased amongst such women as they maintained extensive work hours and gained training but eventually failed to receive any benefits or leadership opportunities. While outcomes on mental or physical health were not a concern of the current study, it does indicate the potential for reduced motivation, lacking confidence, and self-esteem, which affects the ability of AAW to seek positions of equity despite barriers in corporate America (Bruce-Golding, 2020; Spates et al., 2020; Stockfelt, 2018).

Participants also expressed that while feminism is often a key characteristic of many workplace policies and inclusivity training, that actual application or consideration from male and female coworkers was absent. In turn, there was a lack of support or allyship from other White females even though harassment and misogyny were vital characteristics of their lived experiences. These findings also corroborate previous research that demonstrated that Black women do not feel supported in the workplace or

find allyship with other White women despite some shared struggles (Coles & Pasek, 2020; LeanIn, 2021; IBM, 2021; Settles et al., 2020). Researchers indicate that there is a lack of inclusive experiences, poor belongingness, and increased sexism and racism in the workplace, with white women most likely to perpetuate racist and sexist stereotypes that harmfully affect Black women (Coles & Pasek, 2020; LeanIn, 2021; IBM, 2021; Settles et al., 2020). Ultimately, the findings of this study corroborate previous research while expanding upon application to demonstrate the disheartening experiences of AAW women when seeking and failing to obtain executive positions.

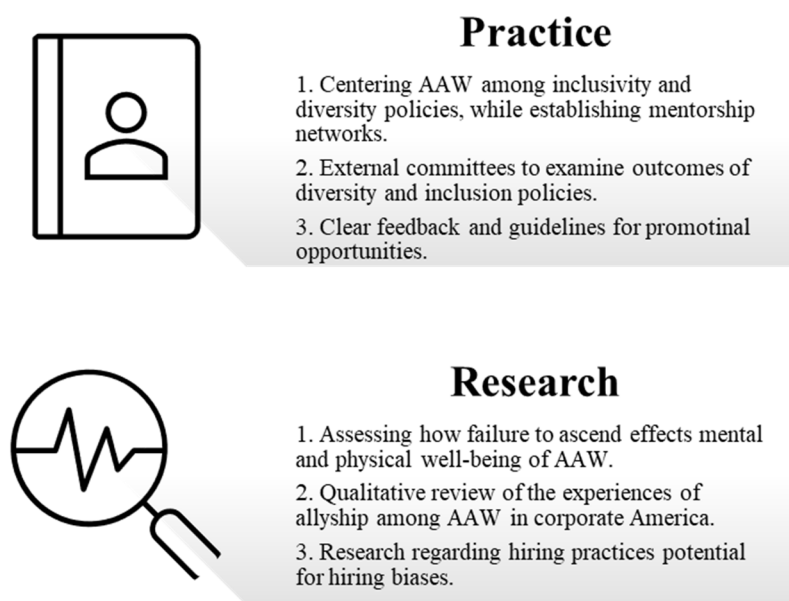
The third theme demonstrates that AAWs face the glass ceiling when encountering barriers in the workplace that prevent their success as leaders and skilled employees. For example, participants demonstrated they would likely receive pushback from male and female AAW non-AAW coworkers and leaders. Such information expands upon the GCT and IT theory by demonstrating that the relationships between coworkers in the modern workplace may inhibit or aid in the secession of AAW to executive positions. Furthermore, participants expressed that they were likely to feel that diversity was either a priority that benefited them or led to stark visibility of their gender and racial identities without appreciating their skills, qualifications, or education. Together, the information supplied by AAW demonstrates the need for a renewed consideration of how allyship in the workplace can hinder or aid AAW in ascending to executive positions. Furthermore, the findings confirm the previous data associated with GCT and indicate that AAW will experience more barriers than others based on gender and racial identities (Atewologun, 2018; Coles & Pasek, 2020; Settles et al., 2020).

## Recommendations for Practice

In the following section, I present three critical recommendations for the practice. Practice recommendations include the inclusion of external committee investigations, centering of AAW and inclusivity and diversity policy creation, and clear guidelines for hiring procedures and removal of bias and feedback assessments—a general overview of recommendations for practice and research, as supplied in Figure 3.

### Figure 3

#### *Recommendations for Research and Practice Based on Study Findings*



#### *Centering AAWs in Inclusivity and Diversity Policy Creation and Implementation*

The first recommendation for practice is to center the experiences and expertise of AAW when developing and implementing inclusivity and diversity policies. Establishing mentorship networks is suggested within such policies to ensure AAW has access to individuals with similar experiences and identities. The implementation of policies and

practices that do not center on AAW fails. Based on the participants' experiences in this study, AAW expertise is needed to address barriers and biases in the workplace. The burden of developing and implementing policies should not fall entirely upon AAW. Still, it should include their understanding, expertise, and experiences to ensure implementation is more than a face-value measure. Previous researchers recommend developing mentorship strategies, which are also a form of formal and informal mentoring that can allow for overcoming barriers in the workplace (Greene, 2019; Hideg et al., 2019). As participants mentioned in this study, informal networking with their peers was one way to identify potentially biased leaders and coworkers, share corroboration of experiences, and identify potential opportunities for change. As such, all workplaces should implement such methods to ensure that they are provided a work environment of positivity and belongingness while offering opportunities for leadership ascension.

### ***External Committee Investigations***

Research from leading institutions demonstrates that American corporate organizations that assess outcomes of diversity inclusivity initiatives without the aid of external organizations are at risk of bias (LeanIn, 2021; IBM, 2021). Therefore, external committee investigations should be implemented to thoroughly provide an effective means of assessing how effective or ineffective measures, policies, and hiring procedures are for the benefit of an AAW. Such external committee investigations can also benefit all coworkers by creating an environment that values the inclusion of people of color within leadership positions while creating accountability for leaders and coworkers to

foster belongingness in the workplace. Investigations can also be made as open review documents, in which AAW can access and assess if workplaces genuinely have met the conditions for an equitable environment in which they can seek ascension.

### ***Clear Guidelines for Hiring Procedures and Feedback Assessments***

The AAW in the study expressed that when they failed to gain a position, the feedback obtained was absent or poor. Some participants reflected that feedback consisted of gaining more training, but after gaining training, they were still not considered eligible for executive positions. All such systematic bias inherently exists within hiring procedures. The hiring guidelines must be clear, delineated towards objective qualifications, and followed by appropriate feedback assessments. Gaining feedback can allow for improved interview techniques, assessing the required qualifications needed, and addressing opportunities for AAW to ascend to future leadership positions. Corporate America is suggested to follow such recommendations by improving feedback and ensuring that hiring biases are absent through objective and clear guidelines for executive positions.

### **Recommendations for Research**

In the following section, the recommendations for research are discussed. The following recommendations for research span the topics of assessing the effects of the mental and physical well-being of failure to ascend, reviewing allyship through qualitative experiences, and researching hiring practices' potential for biases. Figure 3 demonstrates the recommendations for research.

### ***Assessing Mental and Physical Wellbeing***

The first recommendation is to provide research examining the potential for mental and physical well-being effects based upon the failure to ascend among AAW. Researchers are recommended to examine this topic due to the potential for adverse outcomes and mental well-being based on the experiences provided by participants in this study. The painful experiences of failing to gain positions due to harassment and discrimination against gender and identity have been shown to affect individuals adversely. Therefore, researchers should examine this topic to provide implications for practice and research that can benefit AAW through appropriate interventions.

### ***Review of Allyship Experiences***

The second recommendation for research is to review allyship experiences from individuals and corporate America, including AAW. Participants in this study reflected difficulties in gaining allyship from coworkers and other women. Resultantly, exploring allyship could provide information that supports practice and research. Further understanding barriers and aids towards improving allyship and the practices in the workplace that support inclusiveness and belongingness can also positively affect the ascension of AAW into executive leadership positions.

### ***Research Involving Hiring Biases***

Researchers should explore hiring biases within corporate America to understand further factors contributing to or hindering ascension into executive positions for AAW. For example, research and findings from the current study demonstrated the potential for hiring underqualified or less qualified males compared to AAW (Chance, 2022; Fenerci

et al., 2019). As a result, research understanding hiring biases and factors that can overcome such an issue could potentially lead to improved opportunities for AAW to ascend to executive positions. Research regarding this topic may provide information that supports overcoming the problem identified in the empirical literature while assessing appropriate interventions to support organizations and corporate America.

### **Summary**

In this chapter, I discussed challenges to career advancement due to workplace barriers and biases, failure to ascend due to discrimination in terms of race and gender, and barriers to success via the glass ceiling and their implications with a review of the empirical literature. I also reviewed textual findings and theoretical literature. Data demonstrated opportunities for research and practice, which were also discussed in this chapter. Practice recommendations included understanding guidelines for hiring procedures, implementing external committee investigations, and centering experiences of AAWs when developing and implementing inclusivity and diversity policies. Research recommendations included assessing mental and physical well-being, reviewing allyship experiences, and researching hiring biases.

Data obtained from the current study may support a renewed exploration of how AAWs can be supported in obtaining executive leadership positions in corporate America. The findings of this study demonstrated AAWs face harassment and discrimination based on gender and racial identities, which prevents their ability to obtain executive leadership positions. The information demonstrated corporate America must take significant steps to overcome internal workplace biases and policies that fail to



support AAWs. They must take substantial steps to address inequity and supply AAWs with appropriate pathways to gaining executive leadership positions for diversity, inclusivity, and representation for future generations.

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## Appendix A: Recruiting Material

**Social Media Post**

**A work day in the life of  
African American Women**

***Researcher Seeking Feedback from African American Women in  
a U.S. Corporate Job (past or present)***

Caption: There is a new study about the experiences of African American Women as they apply and do not reach executive-level positions that could help U.S. corporation owners understand your experience or barriers faced. For those volunteers willing, you are invited to share your lived work experiences when you applied and failed to reach executive level in your corporate job.

About the study:

- Identity protected (the published study will not use your name)
- Seeking volunteers
- One 45-60 minutes interview will be requested by phone or zoom (audio recorded)

This study seeks 10-20 volunteers who are:

- 18 years and older only
- English speaking
- Volunteers in the United States
- African American Women/ Black Women that work in a corporate environment
  - May have managerial responsibilities
  - Applied but did not reach executive-level position
  - Work for their company at least 12 months

This interview is part of the doctoral study for Sheriley Y. Smith, Ph.D. student at Walden University. Interviews will take place February 2023.

**Please message me privately if you are interest.**

**Walden Participant Pool <surveys@mail.waldenu.edu>****Response Summary:**

**1. Enter the researcher's email address. (For interview studies, this email address will be posted publicly on the [participant pool webpage](#) so volunteers can contact you.)**

**2. Study title:**

Lived Experiences of African American Women (AAW) Encountering Barriers in Executive Level Advancement in the Business Services Industry

**3. Brief description of study purpose (1 sentence or less):**

The purpose of this study is to develop an understanding of the lived experiences of AAW when they apply for and fail to reach executive positions in the business services industry.

**4. List the inclusion criteria, separated by commas.****5. Time commitment for participant (in minutes):**

45-60 minutes (audio recorded interview via phone or zoom)

**6. Data collection format:**

Interview

**Embedded Data:**

N/A

## Appendix B: IRB Letter of Consent

Approval # is 02-06-23-1038542.

**Notification of Approval to Proceed to Final Study Stage**

workflow@mail.waldenu.edu <workflow@mail.waldenu.edu>

Tue 2/7/2023 8:39 AM

Congratulations! Your Walden Institution Review Board application has been approved. As such, you are approved by Walden University to proceed to the final study stage. If you have questions about the final study process, please contact [research@mail.waldenu.edu](mailto:research@mail.waldenu.edu).

## Appendix C: Consent Form

This study examines how African American Women feel about applying for and not being hired for executive-level positions in American corporations. This form is part of a process called “informed consent” to allow you to understand this study before deciding whether to take part.

This study seeks 10 to 20 volunteers who are:

- 18 years and older only
- English speaking
- Volunteers in the United States
- African American Women/ Black Women that work in a corporate environment
  - May have managerial responsibilities but has
  - Applied but did not reach executive-level position
  - Work for their company at least 12 months

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

### **Study Purpose:**

The purpose of this study is to develop an understanding of the lived experiences of AAW when they apply for and fail to reach executive positions in the business services industry. The study seeks to expand on the current body of knowledge on this topic and increase awareness and to assist leadership decisions and overall employment policies in this regard in corporate America.

### **Procedures:**

This study will involve (virtual or phone call meeting for one meeting) you’re completing the following steps:

- One meeting is requested (virtual or phone call)-Taking part in an individual confidential, audio recorded interview (phone or zoom optional available) (approximately 45 to 60 minutes). A second meeting will be scheduled only if needed for clarification (max 30 minutes).

### **Here are some sample questions:**

- Have you applied for an executive position at another organizations?
- What is your perception on what contributed to being passed over for advancement?
- How do you see your company advancing managers into executive positions in terms of race equality?

### **Voluntary Nature of the Study:**

Research should only be done with those who freely volunteer. So everyone involved will respect your decision to join or not. If you decide to join the study now, you can still change your mind later. You may stop at any time.

**Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study:**

Being in this study could involve some risk of the minor discomforts that can be encountered in daily life such as sharing sensitive information. With the protections in place, this study would pose minimal risk to your wellbeing.

This study offers no direct benefits to individual volunteers. The aim of this study is to benefit society by contributing to the current body of knowledge that reports the presence of gender prejudice in corporate environments. The results and implications of this study are related to women's careers and their work environments. The researcher will recommend future research to focus on understanding women's underrepresentation in top leadership positions. The information will help in the identification of methods that can be used to assist employees and corporations to treat all employees equally. Once the analysis is complete, the researcher will share the overall results by posting a summary at this webpage: scholarworks. When a doctoral student graduates, the study's results will be automatically posted online in [Scholarworks](#) (a publication of Walden University research).

**Payment:**

None

**Privacy:**

The researcher is required to protect your privacy. Your identity will be kept confidential, within the limits of the law. The researcher is only allowed to share your identity or contact info as needed with Walden University supervisors (who are also required to protect your privacy) or with authorities if court-ordered (very rare). The researcher will not use your personal information for any purposes outside of this research project. Also, the researcher will not include your name or anything else that could identify you in the study reports. If the researcher were to share this dataset with another researcher in the future, the dataset would contain no identifiers so this would not involve another round of obtaining informed consent. Data will be kept secure by keeping it in a password protected computer file with a password, with only myself having access. Data will be kept for a period of at least 5 years, as required by the university.

**Contacts and Questions:**

You can ask questions of the researcher by email. If you want to talk privately about your rights as a participant or any negative parts of the study, you can call Walden University's Research Participant Advocate at 612-312-1210. Walden University's approval number for this study is 02-06-23-1038542. It expires on February 6, 2024.



You might wish to retain this consent form for your records. You may ask the researcher or Walden University for a copy at any time using the contact info above.

### **Obtaining Your Consent Via Email**

If you feel you understand the study and wish to volunteer, please indicate your consent by replying to this email with the words, "I consent".

---

Print Name

Date

---

Signature

## Appendix D: Interview Guide and Protocol

Date/time

My name is Sheriley Y. Smith, and I will be facilitating this interview. Thank you so much for participating in this interview. The purpose of the phenomenological study is to develop an understanding of the lived experiences of AAW when they apply for and fail to reach executive positions in the business services industry. This study will examine the journey of those aspiring to reach but not currently holding executive-level jobs. The study seeks to expand on the current body of knowledge on this topic and increase awareness and to assist leadership decisions and overall employment policies in this regard in corporate America. The aim of this study offers a practical benefit by meeting the need of achieving equitable outcomes for AAW's who experience intersectional marginalization based on their race and gender. Thus, the findings from this research can fulfill both a scholastic and a social, practical need.

Your participation is voluntary, and you may discontinue the interview at any time. This interview will be recorded through a Zoom platform. If you feel uncomfortable at any time, please do let me know and I will stop the recording.

If you are ready, let's get started.

## Appendix E1: Instrumentation

Yes	No	18-year-old or older
Yes	No	English Speaker
Yes	No	Volunteer in the United States
Yes	No	African American Woman in Corporate work environment
Yes	No	Hold Managerial Responsibility
Yes	No	Work for company at least 12 months

Each response needs to be yes in order to participate in the research.

I1. As we get started in our conversation, I'd like to know more about your career advancement experience. Please describe what it's like for you to apply for executive level positions

SQ1. Discuss your experience with applying for an executive position within your current organization.

SQ2. Have you applied for an executive position at another organizations? If so explain that experience.

SQ3. How were the two experiences different?

I2. Discuss your experiences and perception on the fairness of career advancement in your current company.

SQ1. How do you see your company advancing managers into executive positions in terms of race equality?

SQ2. How do you see your company advancing managers into executive positions in terms of gender equality?

I3. Have you ever been passed over for promotion or selection to a higher position?

SQ1. If so, how did that feel?

I4. If you applied for an executive position in your current company, what type of assessment was given?

SQ1. Who gave the assessment?

SQ2. What was their race?

I5. Please describe what role you feel your race has played in your career advancement.

I6. What is your perception on what contributed to being passed over for advancement?

SQ1. How much do you attribute this decision on your gender?

SQ2. How much do you attribute this decision on your race?

I7. What role do you feel/believe gender has played in your career advancement?




I8. What role do you feel/believe race has played in your career advancement?

I9. Discuss your experiences working with men who have advanced higher than you?

I10. Discuss your experiences working with individuals of another race who have advanced higher than you?

Probing Question: Can you tell me more? Tell more about.... Can you explain... What was that like?

## Appendix F: CITI Certificate

		Completion Date 27-Oct-2020 Expiration Date N/A Record ID 39161688
This is to certify that:		
<b>Sheriley Smith</b>		
Has completed the following CITI Program course:		
<b>Student's</b>	(Curriculum Group)	<div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px;">           Not valid for renewal of certification through CME. Do not use for TransCelerate mutual recognition (see Completion Report).         </div>
<b>Doctoral Student Researchers</b>	(Course Learner Group)	
<b>1 - Basic Course</b>	(Stage)	
Under requirements set by:		
<b>Walden University</b>		
 Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative		
Verify at <a href="http://www.citiprogram.org/verify/?w77748742-c835-4dfc-a452-29aec3d955e-39161688">www.citiprogram.org/verify/?w77748742-c835-4dfc-a452-29aec3d955e-39161688</a>		