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African Americans' Collective Experiences of Corporate Leadership Roles in U.S. Fortune 500 Companies

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Walden University

College of Management and Human Potential

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by Teresa L. Roberson

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Walden University

2024

Abstract

African Americans' Collective Experiences of Corporate Leadership Roles in U.S.

Fortune 500 Companies

by

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MA, American Military University, 2005

BA, Averett University, 2002

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Management

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Abstract

African Americans remain underrepresented in corporate leadership positions, a dynamic and complex phenomenon that is poorly understood. Understanding the difficulties faced by corporate midlevel African Americans may help Fortune 500 companies to improve their equity practices. Using intersectionality theory and applied critical leadership theory as the conceptual framework, this phenomenological study was conducted to explore the collective experiences of African Americans regarding seeking promotions and maintaining corporate leadership roles in Fortune 500 companies in the United States and to compare the collective experiences of male and female African Americans. The research questions that guided this study centered on the experiences of corporate midlevel African Americans seeking promotions and maintaining senior leadership positions in Fortune 500 companies. Semi-structured interviews with seven African American males and seven African American females were conducted in order to explore collective experiences as well as the experiences of males and females. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis. Findings indicated that African American midlevel managers collectively experience struggles related to resolving conflicts, navigating their careers, and facing discrimination while pursuing career growth. Males tended to have a professional approach when making decisions, whereas females tended to consider the personal and professional aspects of their lives when decision making. Results indicated the need to foster inclusive working environments, with leaders who disrupt negative stereotypes and use consensus building in their management practices. Findings have potential for positive social change, as existing corporate leaders increasingly model socially conscious leadership to African Americans aspiring to seek and maintain leadership positions in corporate America.

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Dedication

I would like to dedicate this special honor to my grandmother, Jessie V. Bolton, for being the backbone of the family as well as an inspiration to me. Without your guidance and strong teachings, I would not have been able to keep the momentum in achieving this milestone. Additionally, I would also like to praise my lovely daughter Ciena Lashon, the love of my life, for being my lodestone and shining star. You are the compass I needed to direct me to continuously strive to be a better mother, woman, and mentor to others. And lastly, to my committee chair members: Drs. Elizabeth Thompson and Danetra Quarterman. Thank you.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Civil Rights legislation and society's general advancements have improved African Americans' standing in many ways. However, a considerable gap remains between African American representation in the general population and African American representation among the senior leadership of large corporations (Roeche, 2021). This gap represents an unmet promise of equity and may point to persistent systemic racism in promotion, especially among Fortune 500 companies (Alan et al., 2020). Some barriers to promotion have been identified in the literature (Sales et al., 2019), but more broadly, the understanding of the difficulties faced by African Americans in achieving senior leadership positions remain poorly understood. Collective experiences are necessary to fully understand the issues faced by African Americans (Townsend, 2021). This situation is because collective perceptions capture the larger picture of the circumstances surrounding the entire group, not merely the trajectory of individual participants' careers (Selvanathan et al., 2023). Hence, in this study, the focus was on collective experiences.

In Chapter 1, I introduce an overview of the present study. The chapter begins by discussing the background factors that inform the research problem. After the background, the problem and the corresponding research purpose are presented. The central research question is derived from the research problem and purpose. Following the research question, the conceptual framework, which combines intersectionality theory and the theory of applied critical leadership, is presented. Chapter 1 also includes a brief overview of the nature of the study. Next, essential definitions are presented alongside the study's assumptions, delimitations, and limitations. Chapter 1 concludes with the threefold significance of the study and a summary.

Background of the Study

Although no longer the largest minority group in the country, African Americans represent a large and significant portion of the population, a portion for which the promise of equality afforded by the Declaration of Independence has long remained elusive. Today, African Americans comprise 13% of the U.S. population, the second largest minority group after Hispanic people (U.S. Census Bureau, 2023). African American representation in the overall corporate workforce is already well below that of the general population at 8% (Roeche, 2021). However, although this rate is at least roughly comparable to the overall population, around 61.5%, African American representation in senior leadership roles at Fortune 500 companies is much worse, at a mere 1% (Roeche, 2021). This statistic is 12.5% of their representation in the corporate world and 7.7% of their representation in the general population. Therefore, it is reasonable to assert that systemic barriers prevent African Americans from being promoted to executive-level leadership positions at Fortune 500 firms (Randel et al., 2021).

The Fortune 500 index lists the 500 largest firms in the U.S. economy. Fortune 500 firms are included and ranked based on their reported total revenue on an annual basis (Legutko, 2020). The Fortune 500 listing includes publicly traded and privately held firms that report their annual total revenue. Consequently, the Fortune 500 index is typically considered an authoritative list of the largest and most productive firms in the U.S. economy and a proxy for the corporate world (Kaufman & Petts, 2022). Therefore, the dramatic underrepresentation of African Americans in the executive ranks of Fortune 500 companies can be reasonably taken as indicative of a failing of the corporate world at large.

Failure to include African Americans as Fortune 500 executives is a problem that goes beyond equity and social justice. Research suggests that firms with more diversified leadership tend to perform better financially (Gomez & Bernet, 2019). The benefits of diverse leadership stem from several sources but are most broadly understood to stem from diverse leaders' more comprehensive array of perspectives (DuBrin, 2022). Therefore, the underrepresentation of African Americans in the leadership of Fortune 500 companies is not just a moral and social failing but one with financial implications for firms and shareholders.

In the existing literature, there is some evidence for the reasons underlying underrepresentation. One such barrier is bias on boards and shareholders when evaluating African Americans for executive positions (Gligor et al., 2021). Different leadership ideas stemming from different cultural contexts may also contribute to a lack of promotion for African Americans (Feldman, 2019). Tokenism and hypervisibility may also discourage African Americans from seeking leadership positions in many cases (Dickens et al., 2019). However, these ideas only show parts of the reason for such a dramatic difference in representation.

Therefore, there is a need for more research into diverse corporate leadership from a human resources (HR) management perspective (Santamaría et al., 2022). Additionally, research is needed into the practices African Americans perceive as viable for seeking promotion and the benefits and drawbacks of these tactics (Smith et al., 2019). Finally, there is a need to understand the complex pressures and factors that shape minority employees' choices regarding their career paths (Dickens et al., 2019).

Problem Statement

The general problem is that African Americans remain highly underrepresented in corporate leadership positions (Randel et al., 2021). According to a report by Roeche (2021), African Americans comprise 13% of the overall population but only account for 8% of employees in professional roles. Further, African Americans only hold 3.2% of any executive roles and only 1% of executive roles in Fortune 500 companies (Roeche, 2021). This finding has remained even as other minority groups, such as Hispanics, have gained greater parity in leadership positions (Alan et al., 2020). Research illustrates myriad barriers to promotion, including feeling overlooked and underappreciated (Sales et al., 2019) or being discriminated against even in terms of favorability views when appointed to chief executive officer (CEO) or other executive positions (Gligor et al., 2021). However, these overt barriers may not explain all the causes of underrepresentation. Other pressures, such as conflicting expectations from followers from different backgrounds (McClerking & Block, 2020) or conflicting concepts of leadership style relative to the prevailing organizational culture (Feldman, 2019), may cause some African Americans to forego seeking or maintaining corporate leadership roles voluntarily.

In addition, Selvanathan et al. (2023) indicated that a complete understanding of resilience and victimhood for African Americans requires an understanding of the collective experience because of the communal nature of African American culture. Similarly, Townsend (2021) emphasized the collective experiences' role in understanding African Americans' lack of representation in leadership. In particular, the collective experiences of African Americans may be divided along gendered lines in ways that are important to understand. To address this issue, the specific research problem addressed through this

study was the limited understanding of corporate midlevel African American experiences in seeking and maintaining senior leadership positions in Fortune 500 companies (Dickens et al., 2019; Randel et al., 2021).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the collective experiences of African Americans regarding seeking promotions and maintaining corporate leadership roles in Fortune 500 companies in the United States, as well as to compare the collective experiences of male and female African Americans. The central phenomenon of interest for the study was the experiences of corporate midlevel African Americans in seeking and maintaining senior leadership positions in Fortune 500 companies. The specific facet of this phenomenon was the difficulties experienced by corporate midlevel African Americans in Fortune 500 companies. In particular, the *collective* experiences of these difficulties were vital.

African American culture is communal and is best understood through collective experiences (Selvanathan et al., 2023). Additionally, it is necessary to explore potential gendered differences in the participants' collective experiences. Intersectionality theory emphasizes the uniquely intersectional aspects of marginalization that may occur at the intersection of race and gender (Crenshaw, 2017).

Research Questions

The present study was guided by a single, overarching qualitative research question and two subquestions as follows:

RQ: What are the collective experiences of corporate midlevel African Americans in seeking promotions and maintaining senior leadership positions in Fortune 500 companies?

SQ1: What are the collective experiences of corporate midlevel African American men in seeking promotions and maintaining senior leadership positions in Fortune 500 companies?

SQ2: What are the collective experiences of corporate midlevel African American women in seeking promotions and maintaining senior leadership positions in Fortune 500 companies?

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for the present study was built from intersectionality theory and the theory of applied critical leadership. Developed by Crenshaw in 1989, the intersectionality theory posits that the way an individual is viewed by society through social perspectives, such as gender, race, or class, creates distinct but overlapping barriers leading to disadvantages and discrimination (Crenshaw, 2017). Intersectionality has been used in previous research regarding African American individuals and their experiences within the workplace (Rosette et al., 2018). The applied critical leadership theory also presents a “sociocultural view of leadership, defining multiple ways people of color harness the power of intersecting racial, ethnic, gendered, linguistic, socio-economic, and migrant leadership practices” (Santamaría et al., 2022, p. 1). The intersectionality theory and applied critical leadership underpinned the theme of this present research to offer a way of understanding corporate midlevel African Americans’ difficulty in seeking and maintaining senior leadership positions in Fortune 500 companies.

First, intersectionality theory was selected as it was used to contextualize how gender, race, and class might influence African Americans’ experiences while gaining or maintaining corporate leadership roles (Crenshaw, 2017). Specifically, the exploration

occurred regarding how these social constructs could work together to create barriers to gaining or maintaining corporate leadership roles. Hence, intersectionality theory framed the specific difficulties that faced African Americans who had secondary marginalized identities, including women or those from poor socioeconomic backgrounds. This barrier or difficulty might have encompassed many, though likely not all, corporate midlevel African Americans' difficulties seeking and maintaining senior leadership positions in Fortune 500 companies.

Intersectionality theory is critical regarding people's potentially different collective experiences. Intersectionality theory was developed to address African American women's unique experiences (Crenshaw, 2017). Therefore, its usage presented the possibility that the collective experiences of African American men and African American women would materially differ. I used critical leadership theory to understand diverse leadership perspectives and the intersectionality theory to include the lens of diverse leadership. Critical leadership theory was also used as an HR management lens to address the research problem.

Though Santamaría et al. (2022) developed the theory for addressing the experiences of diverse female leaders, the theory contained numerous other axes of diverse leadership (race, ethnicity, migrant status, etc.) that could be applied to diverse leadership. The concept of collective experiences is essential to the African American perspective (Selvanathan et al., 2023). Therefore, understanding the diverse leadership attributes of African American identity outlined in critical leadership theory would require engaging with collective experiences, not just individual experiences. By grounding the present study in intersectionality theory and applied critical leadership, it was possible to understand

corporate leadership critically and socioculturally from diverse perspectives. The study also showed how these broad perspectives could lead to different perceptions of why African Americans sought promotions or what they did to maintain leadership positions.

Nature of the Study

A qualitative methodology and a transcendental phenomenology research design were used in this present research. In a qualitative study, I explored the central research phenomenon through open-ended inquiry that helped fully understand the issues under study holistically (e.g., Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Therefore, qualitative research is highly subjective and ideal for studying inherently subjective phenomena (Moen & Middelthon, 2015). The research question guiding this study was open-ended and descriptive open-ended, aligning with a qualitative methodology. I also addressed a deeply subjective phenomenon, one necessarily bound in the experiences of corporate midlevel African Americans.

Phenomenology is a qualitative research design used to explore an overall phenomenon through the lived experiences of the study participants (Moustakas, 1994). Phenomenology was appropriate to the present study as the research was intended to explore the lived experiences of African Americans seeking and maintaining corporate leadership roles in Fortune 500 companies in the United States. The specific type of phenomenology was transcendental phenomenology, characterized by a greater emphasis on me bracketing and viewing the subject with new eyes (e.g., Moustakas, 1994). A transcendental design was appropriate because I had significant preconceptions and biases to be mitigated.

The broad population of interest was corporate midlevel African Americans. Within the overall population, the specific target population was corporate midlevel African Americans working at U.S. Fortune 500 companies. The inclusion criteria were that participants (a) be at least 18 years of age, (b) be employed at a Fortune 500 company, (c) have at least 1 year of experience in a midlevel position, (d) identify as African American, and (e) be legally permitted to discuss issues relating to promotion (i.e., not bound by nondisclosure agreements). Sampling for the study was purposive. The preliminary sample size for the study was 20 participants. Beyond me, the sole data collection instrument was qualitative, semistructured interviews. These interviews produced in-depth qualitative data guided by an interview guide to ensure the data collected by the present study were appropriate for answering the research questions. I developed the interview guide for the present study (see Appendix A).

Data analysis for the present study involved Clarke et al.'s (2015) approach to qualitative thematic analysis, with the assistance of NVivo 12 software. Thematic analysis is a six-step process to extract key themes from qualitative data (Clarke et al., 2015). The six steps are as follows: (a) build familiarity with the data, (b) perform open coding, (c) develop preliminary themes, (d) validate themes, (e) finalize and name the themes, and (f) recontextualize the themes (Clarke et al., 2015). In addition, NVivo 12 software was used to help organize the data so that I could more easily identify potential patterns within the data. Nevertheless, I completed the actual analysis.

Definitions

African Americans: In this study, African Americans were those who self-identified as “African American” or “Black” in alignment with the U.S. Census Bureau (2023) category.

Corporate leadership positions: In this study, corporate leadership positions referred to senior management positions, those in which African Americans were typically underrepresented (Roeche, 2021). There was a focus on executive positions, such as CEO, but other senior-level managerial positions were included.

Fortune 500: The Fortune 500 index lists the 500 largest firms in the U.S. economy. Fortune 500 firms are included and ranked based on their reported total revenue on an annual basis (Legutko, 2020). The Fortune 500 listing includes publicly traded and privately held firms that report their annual total revenue.

Systemic racism: Systemic racism represents types of racial discrimination that are implicit in the function of systems. Systemic racism serves to perpetuate racial disparity even when no parties involved engage in explicit racism (McCluney, King, et al., 2021).

Assumptions

Assumptions are essential; foundational components of the study are believed but cannot be demonstrated as true. Assumptions are necessary because most research requires some assumptions to be workable, partly because much of the world cannot be empirically tested (Balnaves & Caputi, 2001). Therefore, assumptions are a ubiquitous feature of research, including this study. Critical assumptions for this study are presented in this section.

First, it was assumed that the study participants would respond entirely and truthfully to the data collection. This assumption is needed because qualitative research is used to explore and understand subjective insights into the participants' experiences that cannot be externally verified (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Hence, it was necessary to rely on the truthfulness of responses. Second, it was assumed that corporate midlevel African

Americans gave significant thought to issues of leadership and promotion and could provide responses sufficient to answer the research question. This assumption was grounded in the concept that promotion and career ambitions were an essential part of corporate culture, and it would be unlikely for anyone who successfully reached the midlevel of the corporate hierarchy not to have given significant thought to issues of promotion or future ambitions. Finally, it was assumed that midlevel corporate African Americans faced difficulties in pursuing promotion to the senior management level and that participants represented the overall African American population seeking and maintaining corporate leadership roles. This assumption was grounded in the well-evinced inequity that had persisted at the senior management level in Fortune 500 companies.

Scope and Delimitations

The scope of this study was to explore the lived experiences of African Americans regarding seeking and maintaining corporate leadership roles in Fortune 500 companies in the United States. I interviewed African Americans in middle management to understand better their lived experiences regarding seeking and maintaining promotion. Interviewing all African Americans in middle management across all companies seeking or maintaining promotion was infeasible. So, to do this study effectively, I attempted to sample 20 individuals from across the United States employed solely in Fortune 500 companies. Other choices were also made to delimit this present research.

Delimitations are deliberately enacted limits on the scope of a study. A researcher implements delimitations to make the study more feasible or focus it on specific areas of interest (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Hence, delimitations are omnipresent in research. This section presents the delimitations of the present study.

First, the study was delimited to the experiences of corporate midlevel African Americans in seeking and maintaining senior leadership positions in Fortune 500 companies. This delimitation was selected following the research gap that motivated the present study. These individuals already had a foothold in the corporate world and should represent a population of future potential leaders. Therefore, corporate midlevel African Americans could offer the most relevant insights for addressing the research purpose. The study was also delimited to the specific context of Fortune 500 companies. Fortune 500 companies represented an essential segment of the economy. Moreover, these companies were often treated as a representative index of the general corporate world, representing a relevant context to study barriers to senior management-level equity for African Americans.

In addition to the delimitations discussed above, some delimitations were associated with completing this research. This study was delimited to the time it took to complete it. This study was expected to be completed at the end of the 2023 academic year. Therefore, events occurring during this time might have influenced results, as might the design choice or the interview questions used to collect participants' data.

Limitations

Limitations are the weaknesses of a study. Limitations are typically inherent in the methodology choices made when creating a study and, within the context of those choices, are unavoidable (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Therefore, limitations would exist for all research, and this study was no exception. The limitations of the study are presented in this section.

First, the present study was limited by self-reported data. Qualitative research, which is subjective, relies on self-reported data (Moen & Middelthon, 2015). Such data

cannot be externally validated to be true and must be taken in good faith. To mitigate the limitation of self-reported data, I assured participants of the confidentiality and privacy of their responses so that they could speak openly and honestly. A second limitation of the study was self-selection bias. Under research ethics (Balnaves & Caputi, 2001), participation in the study must remain voluntary despite creating the possibility that those who expressed interest and ultimately participated in the study would have been, in some way, materially different from those who did not. An effort was made to recruit as diverse a sample as possible to minimize the effects of this limitation. In addition, the limitations section in Chapter 5 assesses if the sample seems skewed. Finally, the present study was limited by my biases. As a scholar interested in the research topic, I inevitably had expectations, preconceptions, and biases. It was important for me to engage in reflexive practice to mitigate the effects of these factors.

Significance of the Study

The present study has significance in three respects. The study is significant concerning practice, with results expected to aid African American employees and hiring managers in navigating the experiences of seeking and maintaining promotion. Additionally, this study may have significance concerning theory, expanding both intersectionality theory and applied critical leadership theory. Finally, this study may have significance for social change. This section informs of the nature of these individual significances.

Significance to Practice

The practical significance of the present study relates to the functional needs of African Americans employed at Fortune 500 companies. From a practical standpoint, African Americans are underrepresented in corporate leadership (Randel et al., 2021).

Although some of this underrepresentation can be attributed to discrimination and barriers (e.g., Gligor et al., 2021), other minority groups have made more significant gains (Alan et al., 2020). As stated previously, conflicting expectations from followers (McClerking & Block, 2020) or conflicting concepts of leadership style relative to the prevailing organizational culture (Feldman, 2019) may cause some African Americans to forego seeking or maintaining corporate leadership roles voluntarily. Additional potential sources of deferral are much more concerning and need to be addressed by HR efforts, such as perceiving that they would experience more discrimination, conflicting expectations, or tokenism. Hence, understanding the lived experience of African Americans who have sought promotion and maintained leadership roles may be necessary. Such knowledge could help create targeted interventions to mitigate possible barriers and bolster the promotion of African Americans to corporate leadership roles.

Additionally, a better understanding of the difficulties faced by corporate midlevel African Americans employed at Fortune 500 companies may help the companies themselves to improve their equity practices. Furthermore, per Selvanathan et al. (2023), understanding the collective experiences of African Americans is critical to genuinely engaging with their circumstances. The present study focused on collective experiences. Therefore, the results should have greater application and practical significance.

Significance to Theory

The present study's significance to theory may result from addressing a research gap established by reviewing the existing literature. The research gap was triangulated from three calls for additional research. Firstly, in developing the theory of applied critical leadership, Santamaría et al. (2022) noted a need for more research into racial issues in

leadership from an HR management perspective. Secondly, in addressing promotions, Smith et al. (2019) called for further research into the strategies that African Americans perceived as viable for gaining attention and promotion and the benefits and drawbacks of using such strategies. Smith et al. addressed these requests through a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of African American middle management regarding seeking promotion and maintaining leadership positions. Finally, Dickens et al. (2019) more generally indicated a need for additional research regarding complex pressures and factors that shape minority employees' career choices. The research gap of the present study was intended to address all three of these calls for further research.

Consequently, the study's results may offer a significant contribution to theory in the topic area through insights that help bridge noted weaknesses in the existing literature. In addition, considering gendered perspectives helped align the present study with intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 2017). Both male and female African Americans might have collective experiences that differed in keyways described by intersectionality theory. Hence, gender-divided considerations were vital.

Significance to Social Change

The present study may also help contribute to positive social change. Racial inequity at managerial levels of Fortune 500 companies represents a social problem. Even when not deliberate, the persistence of such inequity is likely indicative of ongoing systemic racism (Randel et al., 2021). Therefore, helping to address the problem of unequal representation among senior leadership at Fortune 500 companies is inherently a social issue. The present study may help address this issue by better understanding the difficulties in reaching senior management positions. The results of this study, on their own, may not be able to create

change. However, the results can identify the specific problems that need to be addressed to create positive social change moving forward.

Without understanding the difficulties faced by African Americans in reaching and sustaining senior management positions, addressing those issues is considerably more difficult. Therefore, the results of this study may most strongly contribute to positive social change by helping researchers and corporate leaders identify the specific issues inhibiting equitable representation of African Americans in the senior management of Fortune 500 companies. Once identified, policymakers and organizational leaders can target these issues more deliberately, thereby leading to positive social change.

Summary and Transition

The general problem is that African Americans remain highly underrepresented in corporate leadership positions (Randel et al., 2021). The specific research problem addressed through this study was the limited understanding of corporate midlevel African Americans' difficulty in seeking and maintaining senior leadership positions in Fortune 500 companies. The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the collective experiences of African Americans regarding seeking promotions and maintaining corporate leadership roles in Fortune 500 companies in the United States, as well as to compare the collective experiences of male and female African Americans. The research purpose and corresponding phenomenon were addressed through a single qualitative research question plus two subquestions:

RQ: What are the collective experiences of corporate midlevel African Americans in seeking promotions and maintaining senior leadership positions in Fortune 500 companies?

SQ1: What are the collective experiences of corporate midlevel African American men in seeking promotions and maintaining senior leadership positions in Fortune 500 companies?

SQ2: What are the collective experiences of corporate midlevel African American women in seeking promotions and maintaining senior leadership positions in Fortune 500 companies?

The conceptual framework for the present study was built from the intersectionality and applied critical leadership theories. Implicit in this theoretical perspective was the need to explore the differential collective experiences of male and female African Americans. In addition, I focused on collective experiences rather than just individual ones. I used a qualitative research methodology and a transcendental phenomenological research design. The study is significant concerning practice, theory, and social change through addressing a research gap and identifying difficulties faced by midlevel corporate African Americans, thereby allowing policymakers and corporate leaders to target those difficulties. Chapter 1 offered an introduction to and overview of the present study. Chapter 2 offers an in-depth literature review of the study background and conceptual framework.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

There is a need for more research into diverse corporate leadership from an HR management perspective (Santamaría et al., 2022). Additionally, research is needed into the practices African Americans perceive as viable for seeking promotion and the benefits and drawbacks of these tactics (Smith et al., 2019). Finally, there is a need to understand the complex pressures and factors that shape minority employees' choices regarding their career paths (Dickens et al., 2019). Therefore, the purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the collective experiences of African Americans regarding seeking promotions and maintaining corporate leadership roles in Fortune 500 companies in the United States, as well as to compare the collective experiences of male and female African Americans.

This problem is highlighted by prior research that found African Americans remain highly underrepresented in corporate leadership positions (Randel et al., 2021). For example, only 8% of employees in professional roles are African American, even though African Americans comprise 13% of the overall population in the United States (Roeche, 2021). The underrepresentation of African Americans in professional roles is especially evident. Only 3.2% of any executive roles and only 1% of executive roles in Fortune 500 companies are held by African Americans (Roeche, 2021).

Prior researchers have called for additional research to examine diverse corporate leadership from an HR management perspective (Santamaría et al., 2022). In addition, Smith et al. (2019) noted that research was needed to identify the practices African Americans perceived as viable for seeking promotion and the benefits and drawbacks of these tactics. Finally, there is a need to understand the complex pressures and factors that shape minority employees' choices regarding their career paths (Dickens et al., 2019). Thus,

the purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the collective experiences of African Americans regarding seeking promotions and maintaining corporate leadership roles in Fortune 500 companies in the United States, as well as to compare the collective experiences of male and female African Americans.

This chapter is organized as follows: First, the literature search strategy describes the databases, key search terms, and inclusion and exclusion criteria used to identify current literature related to the selected problem. Next, a discussion of the theories underpinning the current study is offered. Subsequently, a review of the current literature related to the aforementioned problem is provided, including diversity, a recent history of African Americans in corporate leadership, barriers to the upward mobility of African Americans in the workplace, factors influencing the upward mobility of African Americans in the workplace, unique challenges faced by African American leaders in executive roles, coping strategies of African American leaders in executive roles, and efforts to increase the number of African American executives in Fortune 500 companies. Finally, this chapter concludes with a summary of the major themes identified in the literature and describes how the study may fill the identified gaps.

Literature Search Strategy

While conducting this literature review, the databases included the Walden Library, Academic Search Complete, Nexus Uni, Google Scholar, PubMed, and JSTOR. The key terms inputted into the databases included *leaders, leadership, business, executive, CEO, Black, African American, diversity, promotion, professional, career, large firms, success, intersectionality theory, and theory of applied critical leadership*. The search terms were entered both individually and in appropriate combinations.

The criteria for inclusion comprised peer-reviewed journal articles, books, dissertations, and government or professional organization websites published in English to ensure accurate understanding. Exclusion criteria consisted of any sources written in a language other than English or journal articles that had not been peer reviewed. At least 85% of the articles included in this literature were published after 2018 to ensure the most current body of knowledge related to the identified problem was presented.

Theoretical Foundation

The theories grounded in this study included Crenshaw's (1989) intersectionality theory and Santamaría and Santamaría's (2012) applied critical leadership theory. Intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1989) was chosen as a theoretical framework because it was used in research on African American individuals to illuminate their experiences within the workplace (Rosette et al., 2018). Additionally, the applied critical leadership theory (Santamaría & Santamaría, 2012) presented a sociocultural view of leadership that provided an understanding of the various ways people of color can leverage the power of intersecting racial, ethnic, gendered, linguistic, socioeconomic, and migrant leadership practices (Santamaría et al., 2022). Together, intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1989) and applied critical leadership theory (Sanatmaria & Santamaría, 2012) provided a discerning lens through which understanding of corporate midlevel African Americans' difficulty in seeking and maintaining senior leadership positions in Fortune 500 companies could be achieved.

Intersectionality Theory

In a seminal study on intersectionality, Crenshaw (1989) reviewed three court cases in which Black women claimed discrimination based on both race and sex. Crenshaw's

(1989) analysis revealed a contradiction in the court rulings that harmed Black women for being the same gender as White women and harmed them for being racially distinct from White women. Crenshaw (1989) concluded that Black women may experience discrimination in several ways that are not necessarily unidirectional. Thus, an injury could result either from sex discrimination, race discrimination, or both (Crenshaw, 1989). Today, intersectionality theory suggests that the way an individual is viewed by society through social perspectives, such as gender, race, or class, creates distinct but overlapping barriers, leading to disadvantages and discrimination (Crenshaw, 2017).

One key element of intersectionality theory is the multipronged axis to consider individual identity (Morales, 2019). Intersectionality theory allows for a more complex understanding of the inequities resulting from individual experiences related to power hierarchies and oppression by moving beyond the singular axis of gender or race (Morales, 2019). As Crenshaw (1989) explained in a seminal work on intersectionality, "Black women can experience discrimination in ways that are both similar to and different from those that are experienced by White women and Black men" (p. 149). Thus, intersectionality theory is an analytic tool that may be used to understand intersecting structures of oppression (Duran & Jones, 2020).

Another central tenant of intersectionality theory proposes that individuals may experience oppression and privilege depending on the situation or context (Morales, 2019). The intersection of oppression and privilege is exemplified in research by McClerking and Block (2020). The researchers noted that the expectations of Black celebrities as potential leadership figures differ between Black fans and White fans (McClerking & Block, 2020). Black followers viewed Black celebrities as potential leaders and expected them to work

actively toward racial equality. By contrast, White followers preferred that Black celebrities they were fans of stay out of political issues (McClerking & Block, 2020). This example demonstrates one way in which oppression and privilege can be coconstituted on the subjective level.

A third facet of intersectionality theory is its capacity to examine an individual's encounters with privilege and oppression within larger social structures and systems (Morales, 2019). Sims and Carter (2022) highlighted the need for leadership researchers to apply intersectionality: "Most leadership research on women is based on the prototypical White man and woman leader with the assumption those findings are applicable to all people and women" (p. 155). Intersectionality theory enables discernment of how power relationships evolve and are experienced within political, economic, and social mechanisms (Morales, 2019), including marginalized individuals' experiences in the workplace.

Origins of Intersectionality Theory

The concept of intersectionality theory was developed based on a long history of Black feminism and women of color activism (Duran & Jones, 2020). Crenshaw (1989) referenced the examples of Sojourner Truth and Anna Julia Cooper in her work to describe the unique injustices faced by Black women. Truth's famous declaration revealed the exclusion of Black women in women's equality movements: "Ain't I a woman?" (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 16). Crenshaw (1989) argued that Truth's story of being a woman who worked in fields alongside men revealed a contradiction between the ideological myths of womanhood and the reality of Black women's experiences. The example of Anna Julia Cooper shows the marginalization of Black women by Black men in Black liberation politics (Duran & Jones, 2020). According to Crenshaw (1989), Cooper often criticized Black male leaders for

claiming to speak for the race while failing to identify the injustices perpetrated against Black women. Both women were essential to developing intersectionality in demonstrating the multiple marginalized identities of Black women (Duran & Jones, 2020).

Critics of Intersectionality Theory

Although intersectionality is undisputed, critics object to its application in academia and beyond (Coaston, 2019). Conservatives fear intersectionality is a tool to invert the hierarchy of oppression, whereas Crenshaw (1989) argued that intersectionality creates a space for increased advocacy (Coaston, 2019). Lugones (2011) criticized intersectionality as viewing non-White women solely through the lens of oppression. Thomas (2020) responded to Lugones's critique of intersectionality by stating that Crenshaw's (1989) intersectionality theory is an epistemic framework that brings forward marginalized Black women whom feminist frameworks have erased focused on White women and by antiracist policies focused on Black males.

Use of Intersectionality Theory as a Theoretical Foundation

Since its conception as a tool for understanding Black women's experiences at the intersection of race and gender, intersectionality theory has evolved to encompass other marginalized identities (Thomas, 2020) and their relationships with social structures and systems (Morales, 2019). For example, Sadika et al. (2020) applied intersectionality theory to further the understanding of microaggressions and support for LGBTQ persons of color. In another study, Wigglesworth et al. (2022) used intersectionality theory to investigate factors relating to the suicide risk of Black–Native American youth. In addition, intersectionality theory has been applied extensively across several academic disciplines to identify overlapping systems of discrimination (Duran & Jones, 2020). Intersectionality

theory has been utilized as a theoretical framework in disciplines such as history, sociology, literature, philosophy, and anthropology, as well as in feminist studies, ethnic studies, queer studies, and legal studies (Cho et al., 2013).

Applicability of Intersectionality Theory to the Current Study

In addition to intersectionality theory's appropriateness for use in the aforementioned disciplines, the theory has been applied in leadership research. For example, Smith et al. (2019) studied the effects of intersectionality on the career experiences of Black women. In particular, the researchers were interested in unraveling the paradoxical effects of physical visibility versus conceptual invisibility. Smith et al. (2019) noted, "Intersectional invisibility research suggests that [Black women] can be simultaneously invisible—easily overlooked or disregarded—because they are non-prototypical members of their gender and racial identity groups" (p. 1705). To address this complexity, the researchers carried out a large-scale qualitative study. Data were collected from a two-wave sample comprising 59 Black women in executive leadership positions. Based on the results of the interviews, the researchers identified several agentic strategies for achieving visibility that can be used to manage the dual effects of hostile and benign invisibility. This study was essential to the present research because Smith et al. (2019) requested further research on the kinds of tactics that can be used to gain visibility in the workplace and their potential benefits and drawbacks.

McKinney et al. (2021) applied the intersectionality theory as a framework in their study of bullying in an academic workplace experienced by African American women and their subsequent career progression. The researchers found that African American women who experienced bullying in the higher education workplace make career choices that align

with the need for safety instead of career advancement. This study was essential to the present research because McKinney et al. (2021) offered insight into factors that may negatively impact the upward mobility of African Americans in the workplace through the lens of intersectionality theory.

Morgan (2020) incorporated intersectionality theory and organizational psychodynamic theory to explore the experiences of 10 Black women senior managers working in the Ministry of Justice in the United Kingdom. The researcher found that many Black women aspire to be leaders but encounter barriers and challenges to achieving advancement (Morgan, 2020). Black women are often held to a higher standard than their White or male counterparts and are presumed less qualified despite their credentials. Notwithstanding, Black women have devised mechanisms to overcome the challenges associated with gender and racial discrimination, such as tolerating opposition in a male-dominated work environment (Morgan, 2020). This study was essential to the current research because it demonstrated the versatility of intersectionality theory used in tandem with another foundational theory to provide a comprehensive framework for understanding the upward mobility of African Americans in the workplace.

These examples demonstrated that Crenshaw's (1989) intersectional theory applied to the current study as it was used to contextualize how gender, race, and class may influence the experience of African American persons while gaining or maintaining corporate leadership roles. The current study also employed Santamaría and Santamaría's (2012) applied critical leadership theory to understand corporate leadership from diverse perspectives and why African Americans sought promotion or what they did to maintain leadership positions. Together, these theories formed a comprehensive lens to improve

understanding of corporate midlevel African Americans' difficulties in seeking and maintaining senior leadership positions in Fortune 500 companies.

Applied Critical Leadership Theory

Santamaría and Santamaría (2012) described applied critical leadership theory as an intersection of critical race theory, critical pedagogy, and transformational leadership. Applied critical leadership theory is an instrument that discerns how people of color leverage intersecting racial, ethnic, gendered, linguistic, socioeconomic, and migrant leadership practices (Santamaría et al., 2022). As defined by Santamaría and Santamaría (2012), the framework is a "strengths-based model of leadership practice where educational leaders consider the social context of their educational communities and empower individual members of these communities based on the educational leaders' identities as perceived through a CRT [critical race theory] lens" (p. 5).

Santamaría et al. (2022) identified nine core shared characteristics and practices of applied critical leaders gleaned from observation or interviews of 11 diverse leaders who promote social justice and educational equity in their leadership practice. These elements of applied critical leadership include the following: (a) initiating critical courageous conversations in the communities of practice; (b) utilizing consensus building; (c) working deliberately toward disrupting negative racial, cultural, linguistic, gender, and class stereotypes; (d) enacting leadership as a function of giving back to marginalized or minoritized Black and Indigenous peoples, particularly women of color (BIPOC) communities; (e) creating and disseminating information on critical issues for community and mainstream; (f) building trust with members of the mainstream or outside of the community of practice; (g) honoring, welcoming, and including all members of the

constituency; (h) creating and sustaining inclusive and safe spaces for critical and courageous conversations; and (i) enacting servant, reflective, and action-oriented leadership by example.

Origins of Applied Critical Leadership

Originally conceptualized as a framework to inspire K-12 educators to think about a practice of social justice leadership, applied critical leadership theory emerged from the theoretical foundations and principles found within transformational leadership and critical pedagogy, as viewed through critical race theory (Aho & Quaye, 2018). Transformational leadership encompasses liberation, emancipation, democracy, equity, and justice (Schnoor, 2021). Critical pedagogy refers to a pedagogical approach that seeks to fully include the experiences and narratives of the oppressed in teaching practices and curricular content (Schnoor, 2021). Critical race theory challenges traditional approaches in educational institutions and social processes that reinforce power hierarchies and the oppression of marginalized groups (Schnoor, 2021).

Critics of Applied Critical Leadership Theory

A dearth of literature exists with critiques relating to applied critical leadership theory. The few critiques identified while reviewing the relevant literature were narrow in scope. For example, Shah et al. (2022) noted that applied critical leadership "does not sufficiently explain the difficulties that leaders face and the impossibilities of leading for racial justice within systems that are designed to uphold White supremacy" (para. 5) but did not offer further details. Others contended that developers of the theory sacrificed academic rigor in favor of personal narratives and whether individual agency was diminished by the theory's emphasis on systemic problems (Fortin, 2021).

Use of Applied Critical Leadership as a Theoretical Foundation

Critical leadership theory was used in the current study to understand diverse leadership perspectives and the intersectionality theory was used to include the lens of diverse leadership. Applied critical leadership was also used as an HR management lens for the research problem. Though Santamaría et al. (2022) developed the theory for addressing the experiences of diverse female leaders, the theory contains numerous other axes of diverse leadership (race, ethnicity, migrant status, etc.) that can be applied to diverse leadership in general.

However, the theory has been applied predominantly in education. For example, Caradonna (2021) examined the experiences of student activists through the lens of applied critical leadership theory and found that student activists engage in their construction of the leadership process and are cognizant of the predominantly White leadership within higher education. In another study, Martinez et al. (2022) used applied critical leadership theory to determine the influential factors relating to the success of four Latina assistant principals. The study participants noted that their parents and upbringing, ongoing support and mentorship, overcoming discrimination and microaggressions, and becoming change advocates were factors that defined their leadership journeys (Martinez et al., 2022). Finally, Cawley (2020) used applied critical research theory to provide perspective in her study of Canadian postsecondary leaders. Cawley was interested in the leaders' awareness of their identity, values, and willingness toward social justice practices. The findings suggested that all participants' roles and values supported social justice and educational equity (Cawley, 2020).

Applicability of Applied Critical Leadership as a Theoretical Foundation

In addition to its use as a framework in education research, applied critical research theory has been suggested as a theoretical foundation for the research of leadership outside of academia. Santamaría et al. (2022) first introduced applied critical leadership theory as an expansion of human resource development research in May of 2022 to offer a framework representing the voices and leadership experiences of women of color. Applying applied critical leadership theory to underpin the current study should extend the theory's use outside academia.

Literature Review

This section offers an extensive literature review on the topic of interest; there is limited understanding of corporate midlevel African Americans' difficulty in seeking and maintaining senior leadership positions in Fortune 500 companies. The topics progress from broad subject matter, beginning with the general topic of diversity and narrowing to the identified gap in the literature. The section concludes with a summation and further rationale for the current study based on the research presented in the literature review.

Diversity

Diversity is a broad term that describes differences among individuals or groups (Roberson, 2019). The term may refer to observable demographic characteristics, such as gender, ethnicity, age, and culture, or less observable acquired or developed characteristics, such as education, organizational tenure, income, religion, and functional background (Roberson, 2019; Tamunomiebi & John-Eke, 2020). Some use the term to mean the inclusion of all races across professions (Stevenson et al., 2020). Others may view diversity as a matter of legal compliance (Farmanesh et al., 2020). Adejumo (2021) asserted that diversity

is linked with people or groups within an organization identified as being atypical according to White societal norms.

Workplace diversity is embedded with attendant advantages. Tamunomiebi and John-Eke (2020) reported that diversity was associated with collaborative learning environments, team participation, innovation, and increased outputs (Tamunomiebi & John-Eke, 2020). Other benefits of diversity include attracting and retaining talent, lower turnover intentions, improved problem solving, and heightened decision-making procedures (Farmanesh et al., 2020).

Miller and del Carmen Triana (2009) found a positive relationship between racially diverse boards of Fortune 500 companies and both firms' reputations and innovation. Further, the researchers found that board gender diversity positively correlated with innovation (Miller & del Carmen Triana, 2009). Diversity is often paired with inclusion as part of organizational practices to create a more diverse workforce, facilitate productive relationships between members of diverse groups, and ensure inclusive work environments (Roberson, 2019).

Workplace diversity may also result in negative implications. Diversity has been found to foster misunderstanding, suspicion, and conflict if not properly managed (Tamunomiebi & John-Eke, 2020). Workplace diversity initiatives confronted by barriers or lack of managerial support can decrease morale, lower productivity, and distrust (Farmanesh et al., 2020). Negative attitudes toward diversity may cause absenteeism, poor quality work, low morale, or loss of competitiveness (Tamunomiebi & John-Eke, 2020). Pyke (2018) cautioned, "Diversity is supposed to mean inclusion, integration, and equity – not marginalization, segregation, denigration, and discrimination" (p. 7).

African Americans have been the focus of many inclusion and diversity initiatives because Whites dominate hierarchical structures within U.S. organizations (Adejumo, 2021). Adejumo (2021) explained that U.S. leadership has traditionally been associated with White men in America partly because they have been at the top of the American socioeconomic hierarchy since its inception. Recent statistics indicate that 84% of managers in structured organizations identify as White (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020). Conversely, only 3.2% of senior-level managers or executives are Black (Center for Talent Innovation, 2020). Even fewer African Americans (.08%) have reached the CEO position in Fortune 500 companies (Center for Talent Innovation, 2020).

Part of the issue within U.S. companies may be the demographic makeup of America (Adejumo, 2021). In 2019, 76% of Americans identified as White or Latino, while only 13.4% identified as Black (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). Additionally, 53% of Black people live in the Southern United States (Tamir, 2021). Most Fortune 500 companies are headquartered in the Northeastern or Midwestern parts of the United States (Fortune, 2023).

Recent History of African Americans in Corporate Leadership

Since the inception of the Fortune 500 list in 1955, there have been only 19 Black CEOs (Fortune, 2021). Only four African American men hold the position (Posner, 2020; Sahadi, 2020) and one African American woman (Loeb, 2021). Roz Brewer became the first and only African American female executive to lead a Fortune 500 company in March of 2021 (Loeb, 2021).

Although African Americans have largely been kept out of the executive suite, they have been added as employees and to board positions (Guynn & Schrotenboer, 2021). In

1960, no African American directors were on the boards of Fortune 500 companies (Miller & del Carmen Triana, 2009). By 2005, 260 board directors of Fortune 500 companies were African American (Miller & del Carmen Triana, 2009). In 2019, the number of African American directors at 307 companies had increased to 322 (Posner, 2020; Sahadi, 2020).

However, over one-third of S&P 500 companies did not have Black representation on their boards as recently as 2019 (Sahadi, 2020). Additionally, Black board directors were less likely than White board directors to serve on executive committees, including audit and public affairs (Peterson et al., 2007). Similarly, racially diverse executives who report directly to the CEO are underrepresented in chief financial officer and profit-and-loss leadership roles from which CEOs are generally recruited (Larcker & Tayan, 2020). Instead, greater representation of African Americans is found in positions unlikely to lead to the C-suite, such as general counsel or HR, further decreasing the likelihood of increased diversity among Fortune 500 CEOs soon (Larcker & Tayan, 2020).

Barriers to the Upward Mobility of African Americans in the Workplace

Given the paucity of African American representation in executive-level leadership (Center for Talent Innovation, 2020), it is important to understand the barriers prohibiting African American workers from achieving these roles. Barriers to the upward mobility of African Americans in the workplace include racial discrimination, education disparity, individual valence, and cultural differences. This section details these barriers as described in the literature.

Racial Discrimination

Racial discrimination is defined as perceived beliefs, attitudes, systems, or acts denigrating an individual or group based on race (Desalu et al., 2019). Black employees are

often challenged by racial discrimination within organizations (Burt et al., 2018). According to Wingfield and Chavez (2020), the nature and type of discrimination are influenced by an organization's structure and the Black employee's position within the hierarchy.

Stereotypes. One type of discrimination identified in the literature is stereotyping (Greene, 2019; Livingston & Rosette, 2020; Xiao, 2022). Stereotypes are labels that can be unflattering and often ascribe limiting and discriminatory characteristics (Greene, 2019). Green (2019) defined racial stereotypes as "constructed beliefs that all members of the same race share given characteristics" (para. 1).

Recent research has shown that stereotypes permeate the workplace. He et al. (2019) found that occupational stereotypes exist along the dimensions of warmth and competence. Women were more represented in occupations characterized by high warmth and low competence (He et al., 2019). Black and Hispanic workers were more represented in occupations characterized by low competence (He et al., 2019). He et al.'s (2019) research lends understanding to how stereotypical labels earmark some as unsuitable for high-ranking leadership positions, as Green (2019) found. Additionally, He et al.'s (2019) research supported the Coqual (2019) report on Black experiences in corporate America, in which Black leaders stated that their colleagues underestimated their intelligence.

Microaggressions. Another discriminatory practice identified in the literature is microaggression. Microaggressions represent a barrier to the career advancement of African Americans in the workforce (Skeffrey, 2023). Microaggression refers to the subtle and often unconscious actions that devalue people of color and signal that they are undesirably different (Corbin et al., 2018; Fattoracci et al., 2020; Small, 2020). Microaggressions are verbal, nonverbal, or environmental messages that are indirect or seemingly innocuous,

consisting of derogatory slights, insults, putdowns, invalidations, or offensive behaviors (Corbin et al., 2018; Fattoracci et al., 2020; Small, 2020).

Four types of microaggressions were categorized by Fattoracci et al. (2020): microassaults, microinsults, microinvalidations, and environmental microaggressions. Microassaults are overt racism communicated through epithets, demeaning jokes, avoidant behaviors, or harassment (Fattoracci et al., 2020; Salmon, 2022). Verbal microassaults place the burden on the victim to decide whether or not to confront the aggressor (Salmon, 2022). Victims of microassaults may experience feelings of futility when bystanders fail to intervene (Salmon, 2022).

Microinsults are verbal criticisms denigrating personal identities through demeaning encounters that may be intentional or unintentional (Fattoracci et al., 2020; Salmon, 2022). One typical example of a microinsult is complimenting a minority on how well they speak English, even though it is their native language (Rimmer, 2020). Thus, a seeming compliment signals to the minority that they are perceived as a perpetual foreigner in their birth country (Fattoracci et al., 2020).

Microinvalidations occur when the thoughts or experiences of minority group members are invalidated (Fattoracci et al., 2020; Salmon, 2022). For example, referring to a Black coworker as a *diversity hire* negates the effort and qualifications that earned them a promotion (Creary, 2020), reducing an African American's worth to the organization (Shah et al., 2022). Black women working in predominantly White organizations are frequently the targets of microinvalidations (Salmon, 2022). Prior research has described Black women being ignored, having their work discounted, being talked over by colleagues, and having their authority questioned (Jordan-Zachery, 2019; Salmon, 2022).

Finally, environmental microaggressions serve to alienate women and ethnic minorities from important community recognition or contributions (Fattoracci et al., 2020). In addition, environmental microaggressions may signal to minorities that they are unwelcome or unsafe (Salmon, 2020). Typical examples of environmental microaggressions are exclusionary marketing materials featuring all White models or statues of slave owners (Salmon, 2022).

Microaggressions may appear harmless; however, Rimmer (2020) suggested that the day-to-day constancy of microaggressive assaults negatively impacts the wellbeing and resilience of the victim. In addition, microaggressions may negatively affect the workplace environments, psyche, and productivity of minorities (Small, 2020). McKinney et al. (2021) found that microaggressions significantly influenced minority group members' cognitive, emotional, and physical functioning (McKinney et al., 2021). In addition, microaggressions that result in emotional fatigue may negatively impact the profitability of organizations (Farmanesh et al., 2020).

Bullying

A similar form of discrimination to microaggressions is bullying. Bullying is a pattern of behavior that can be perpetrated individually or by a group of people against one or more individuals (Caponechia et al., 2020). Bullies assert their power through coercion and manipulation (Hollis, 2017).

The adverse effects of bullying have been widely documented (Anasori et al., 2020; Jordan-Zachery, 2019; Pyke, 2018). Workplace bullying has been found to predict absence, job turnover, unemployment, suicidal ideation (Høgh et al., 2021), and emotional exhaustion (Anasori et al., 2020). Although not necessarily always directed at marginalized populations,

research has documented the effects of workplace bullying targeting minorities (Hollis, 2018; Jordan-Zachery, 2019; Meriläinen et al., 2019; MinibasPoussard et al., 2018). For instance, workplace bullying negatively impacts the career progression of African Americans (Hollis, 2018; Jordan-Zachery, 2019; McKinney et al., 2021; Meriläinen et al., 2019; MinibasPoussard et al., 2018; Pyke, 2018).

Mirza (2018) explained that dominant cultures within organizations determine access, fairness, and career advancement. Thus, when a bully from the dominant culture targets someone from a nondominant group, the marginalized group member may experience disruptive career paths, the threat of job loss, or turnover intention (Jordan-Zachery, 2019). Consequently, members of nondominant groups experience compromised self-determination and often make career choices that insulate them from harm instead of the goal of advancing (McKinney et al., 2021; Meriläinen et al., 2019; MinibasPoussard et al., 2018).

Gender Paradox

Prior research has shown that African American women face unique barriers to achieving executive-level positions in the workplace (Pyke, 2018; Sales et al., 2019; Smith et al., 2019). Smith et al. (2019) studied the effects of intersectionality on the career experiences of Black women. In particular, the researchers were interested in unraveling the paradoxical effects of physical visibility versus more conceptual invisibility (Smith et al., 2019). Smith et al. (2019) noted, "Intersectional invisibility research suggests that [Black women] can be simultaneously invisible—easily overlooked or disregarded—because they are non-prototypical members of their gender and racial identity groups" (p. 1705). In

essence, Black women stand out because of their race yet are rendered invisible because of their gender (Smith et al., 2019).

Prior research has shown that Black women often feel overlooked as leaders due to their dual minority status (Sales et al., 2019; Salmon, 2022). Pyke (2018) interviewed African American women who were top senior-level executives. The women perceived being a Black woman meant that they would constantly be challenged and rendered invisible, and they realized that things are different for them than for others (Pyke, 2018). Pyke's (2018) findings were supported with evidence offered by Skeffrey (2023), who found that Black women in executive roles were made to feel invisible, labeled as domineering, and had their authority challenged. Salmon (2022) further validated Pyke's (2018) findings; Black female participants who experienced the dichotomy of hypervisibility and invisibility expressed frustration at having their work discounted and being assigned blame if something went wrong (Salmon, 2022).

Xiao (2022) noted that the intersectional factors of race and gender impacted workplace experiences. African American women have expressed being marginalized, undervalued, and underappreciated because of their minority status (Sales et al., 2019). In a study by Greene (2019), African American women reported that maintaining their work position required working additional hours, taking on unpopular projects, and isolating themselves from others. In addition, participants disclosed that they were often blocked from leadership roles in favor of lower-paying support roles with reduced responsibility (Greene, 2019).

Marginalization

Another barrier to the attainment of senior manager and executive roles facing African Americans is marginalization. Marginalization is the process through which individuals or groups are moved to the periphery of society based on their identities, associations, experiences, and environment (Baah et al., 2019; Dorrance-Hall & Gettings, 2023). Livingston and Rosette (2020) defined marginalization from a White, hegemonic patriarchal perspective using two intergroup dynamics: threat and interdependence. From this perspective, marginalization is defined by a combination of low threat and low interdependence (Livingston & Rosette, 2020). In other words, marginalized individuals are not perceived as necessary or threatening to the power or position of the dominant group (Livingston & Rosette, 2020).

Marginalization creates physical, emotional, and psychological barriers to mainstream society that may limit economic, sociopolitical, and cultural participation (Baah et al., 2019). Chin et al. (2020) found that social rejection was a significant predictor of posttraumatic stress in men and depressive symptoms in both men and women. Thus, marginalization resulting in social ostracism is a particularly harmful aspect of discrimination (Chin et al., 2020).

Inherent to the process of marginalization is control over others through power and dominance (Baah et al., 2019). Disparities in income, occupation, education, race, gender role norms, and residential location may influence the creation of margins, resulting in the division of social groups (Baah et al., 2019). Baah et al. (2019) explained that boundaries between dominant and marginalized groups prohibit the vulnerable from accessing resources fully. Prior research supported Baah et al.'s assertion that boundaries limit

opportunities for minorities. For instance, in a study by Greene (2019), African American women experienced a lack of communication and interaction with upper management. In addition, Black professionals were found to be 30% less likely than their White counterparts to access senior leaders at work (Coqual, 2019).

Exclusionary Hiring and Promoting Practices

Despite state and federal laws governing the illegal practice of hiring and promoting based on race, the magnitude of exclusionary hiring and promoting practices in the United States has hardly changed over the past 30 years (Bhopal, 2018). Race still influences hiring decisions (Chen & Yang, 2019). African Americans are less likely to be hired, developed, and promoted than their White peers (Creary, 2020; Roberts & Mayo, 2019; Small, 2020).

Exclusionary hiring practices have been previously identified through field experiments where researchers sent out fictionalized resumes of candidates from different racial or ethnic groups and then measured employer callbacks for interviews or job offers (Hangartner et al., 2021; Quillian et al., 2019). The results indicated that non-White applicants were contacted significantly less often by recruiters than members of their dominant peer groups (Hangartner et al., 2021). A meta-analysis of 97 field experiments found that U.S. Whites received 20% to 40% more callbacks than non-White minorities (Quillian et al., 2019).

Hangartner et al. (2021) explained that the discernable traits that identify applicants as a minority, such as an ethnic-sounding name, contributed to a 4–19% greater reduction in rates of contact from recruiters for individuals of ethnic minority groups than for those from the majority group in their study. Livingston (2020) reported that these rates were even higher for African Americans—10% to nearly 26%. Researchers estimated that

being perceived as White on a job application equated to 8 additional years of work experience (Livingston, 2020). Thus, discrimination based on discernable minority traits, as disclosed on job applications, represents a barrier to obtaining employment for African Americans.

Prior research also suggests that people of color are promoted at slower rates than their White colleagues in predominantly White organizations (Small, 2020). This finding is particularly concerning given that most Fortune 500 companies favor internal candidates for CEO roles; More than 75% of company leaders were promoted from within the organization (Sanders, 2011).

To gain promotion, African Americans must demonstrate greater competence than their White peers (Roberts & Mayo, 2019). Creary (2020) found that Black employees were less likely to be granted leadership roles despite acquiring educational credentials and training equivalent to those of their White peers. One issue impacting recruitment at the highest level of corporate leadership is the advantage of personal connections among White candidates (Coqual, 2019; Greene, 2019; Howard, 2019; Kelley, 2019; Wingfield & Chavez, 2020). Informal networking practices may result in unintentional discrimination when minorities are excluded (Howard, 2019). Black male managers reported experiencing difficulty in building influential networks (Kelley, 2019), and only 34% of Black employees reported having access to senior leaders compared to 44% of their White peers (Coqual, 2019).

Wingfield and Chavez (2020) studied Black healthcare workers' perceptions of racial discrimination. The researchers offered Black doctors' accounts of advantages afforded to White applicants in the competitive arena of obtaining a medical fellowship

(Wingfield & Chavez, 2020). This competitive advantage offered to the White candidates chosen for fellowships was attributed to their affiliation with other White members of the selection committee (Wingfield & Chavez, 2020). Networking groups mainly comprise demographically similar people (Howard, 2019). Thus, employers' reliance on networks for job recruitment represents an unintentional discriminatory practice that blocks qualified applicants from marginalized groups from equitable consideration for elite positions (Howard, 2019).

Education Disparity

The education disparity between Whites and minorities is another barrier prohibiting the upward mobility of Blacks identified in a review of the pertinent literature. Positions of increased responsibility and authority within organizational hierarchies often require greater credentialing (Wingfield & Chavez, 2020). Candidates for advancement may demonstrate their qualifications through educational requirements, certifications, and proof of specific knowledge through exams or relevant work experiences (Wingfield & Chavez, 2020). Greene (2019) found that African American women executives of Fortune 500 companies cited obtaining advanced degrees as necessary for career advancement.

However, obtaining the credentials needed for advancement is more difficult for some than others (Carmichael et al., 2006; Lareau, 2015; Wingfield & Chavez, 2020). A comparison of 6-year completion rates at 4-year academic institutions of all races revealed that African Americans were the least likely to graduate (Banks & Dohy, 2019). Nevertheless, many barriers to educational opportunities for Black students are overlooked (Banks & Dohy, 2019). Poor student outcomes are attributed to deficits in the students themselves rather than systemic problems within the institution (Banks & Dohy, 2019).

Black youth are exposed to opportunity gaps in educational settings that later deny them entry into high-paying careers (Wingfield & Chavez, 2020). Prior research has indicated that Black students have fewer opportunities to take relevant courses (Carmichael et al., 2006) and have less cultural knowledge in navigating academic careers that lead to executive-level positions (Lareau, 2015). In addition, Black students must contend with blatant and implicit racism on college campuses that are initiated by both students and faculty, representing a barrier to degree attainment (Banks & Dohy, 2019).

Statistics have also revealed that efforts to increase the number of African American graduates from higher education institutions have stalled. Only 23% of the Black population over 25 had acquired, at minimum, a bachelor's degree in 2019 (Tamir, 2021). There were more Black MBA graduates of Harvard Business School in 1971 than in 2017—58 and 47, respectively (Roberts et al., 2019). Black men comprised 57% of medical school graduates in 1986 compared to only 35% in 2015 (Wingfield & Chavez, 2020).

Further exacerbating the problem of declining graduation rates among African American students attending 4-year colleges and universities is the decline in enrollment at historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) since the implementation of Title VI of the Civil Rights Act in 1964 that allowed for the desegregation of higher education institutions for the first time (Harper, 2019). HBCUs enroll only 13% of all Black undergraduates but produce almost 22% of Black baccalaureates and 11% of Black recipients of master's and doctoral degrees (Harper, 2019). Harper (2019) attributed the higher graduation rates from HBCUs compared to those of predominantly White institutions to supportive academic and social environments that offer mentoring programs, support

from culturally centered organizations, and a higher percentage of African American faculty members.

Internal Valance

The lack of visible Black leaders in corporate America has negatively impacted the internal valence of aspiring African American professionals (Coqual, 2019; Kelley, 2019). Prior research has shown that the limited visibility of Black managers in leadership roles at Fortune 1000 companies contributed to the lack of leadership self-efficacy in African Americans (Kelley, 2019). Few African American professionals believed that someone of their race could ever achieve a top position at their companies despite being more ambitious than their White colleagues to aspire to executive-level positions (Coqual, 2019). When corporate leaders perceive diversity as unimportant, fewer minority candidates apply for open leadership positions, further reducing the likelihood that a Black candidate will be selected (Flory et al., 2021)

Cultural Differences

Cultural differences may negatively impact the trajectory of African Americans' careers (Jones, 2020; Mbilishaka et al., 2020; McCluney, Durkee, et al., 2021). For example, Black women who wear their hair naturally have been penalized for violating professional norms (Jones, 2020; Mbilishaka et al., 2020). African Americans whose voices were distinctly recognizable as Black were perceived as less competent and received lower wages than similarly educated Black employees whose speech mirrored standard American English (McCluney, Durkee, et al., 2021).

A conflict between cultural aspects could represent one reason African Americans might not seek or desire U.S. corporate leadership positions because of pressure to

assimilate into the dominant White culture (Feldman, 2019). According to Shah et al. (2022), African American leaders who ascend the hierarchy of the workplace perceive exponentially greater pressure to engage in racial code-switching to assimilate into a predominantly White culture. Racial codeswitching is an impression management strategy where Black people adjust their behaviors and self-presentation standards to avoid stereotyping and obtain desired outcomes, such as promotion (McCluney, King, et al., 2021). Also known as *identity shifting*, *racial code-switching* refers to the conscious or unconscious process of shifting one's language, appearance, and cultural behaviors (Dickens et al., 2019).

Engaging in code-switching may result in emotional, psychological, or physical trauma (Grandey et al., 2019; Hewlin & Broomes, 2019) and increased turnover intentions of Black employees (McCluney, Durkee, et al., 2019). Some researchers have suggested that this assimilation represents minorities' complicit participation in their objectification or marginalization (McCluney, Durkee, et al., 2021; Small, 2020). Choosing to code-switch may also elicit a backlash from other members of the same racial group (McCluney, Durkee, et al., 2021).

Factors Influencing Upward Mobility of African Americans in the Workplace

Several factors positively influence the upward mobility of African Americans in the workplace. These factors, found in the relevant literature, include resilience, motivation to lead, education, and exposure to resources and mentors. This section discusses these factors and how they have contributed to the success of African American leaders in executive roles.

Resilience

Small (2020) defined resilience as the ability to persevere and thrive in adversity. Anasori et al. (2020) identified resilience as a "dynamic process that changes over time in

the context of adversity and person-environment interactions" (p. 5). Other researchers have identified resilience as an influential factor relating to the upward mobility of African Americans in the workplace, as established through participants' lived experiences (Shah et al., 2022; Skeffrey, 2023; Small, 2020).

For example, Black women participants in a study by Skeffrey (2023) noted that intentionality and resilience were necessary to achieve executive-level roles. Similarly, a participant in another study by Shah et al. (2022) described needing a "stubborn persistence" (para. 32) to promote activism within a predominantly White system. Small (2020) noted that the resilience of Black leaders was grounded in their spirituality; Both threats and successes were served by participants' spirituality, allowing them to adapt, persevere, and overcome adversity (Small, 2020). In addition, empirical evidence suggests that resilience is a protective factor against adversity-related stress (Anasori et al., 2020). Resilience reduces the likelihood of experiencing the adverse psychological effects of adversity (Anasori et al., 2020).

Motivation to Lead

As described by Chan and Drasgow (2001), the motivation to lead contains four influential factors: personality traits, values, leadership self-efficacy, and previous leadership experiences. Small (2020) found that the motivation to lead stemmed from spirituality. In Small's study, African American leaders credited a higher power with calling them to lead. This higher calling motivated the participants to pursue leadership positions or remain in their positions when faced with adversity (Small, 2020).

The motivation to lead also affects the intensity of effort to persist in leading (Chan & Drasgow, 2001). Motivated individuals apply more effort and spend more time achieving

and maintaining leadership roles and responsibilities (Badura et al., 2020). African Americans in the workplace perceive that they must work harder than their White colleagues to advance in their organization (Adejumo, 2021; Creary, 2020).

Higher Education

Becoming a Fortune 500 executive begins with a good education (Sanders, 2011; Wingfield & Chavez, 2020). Prior research agreed that higher education was needed to attain and maintain senior leadership positions (Greene, 2019). In addition, experience, training, and transition influenced the construction of professional leadership identities (Cruz-Gonzalez et al., 2021).

Education is also essential to reaching the upper echelons of leadership. Pettigrew (2021) contended that interracial education could lead to Black Americans gaining the ability and status historically afforded exclusively to wealthy, White males. In support of this contention, Pettigrew (2021) offered examples of the educational experiences of Black political and business leaders who had risen to elite positions. Among the examples in Pettigrew's (2021) review were Barack Obama, former U.S. president; Roz Brewer, CEO of Walgreens; and Lester Holt, prime-time news anchor for the National Broadcasting Corporation (Pettigrew, 2021). Pettigrew (2021) noted that 14 of the 18 leaders reviewed attended Ivy League schools.

Exposure to Resources and Mentors

Exposure to resources and mentors that aided African Americans in their leadership journey was a common theme in the literature. For example, mentors were beneficial to Black Harvard MBAs who had reached top management positions (Roberts et al., 2019). Greene (2019) and Skeffrey (2023) found that formal and informal mentors were important

to advancing African American women in their roles as senior leaders and executives of Fortune 500 companies. Participants perceived that mentorships aided them in obtaining their position and excelling in their work (Greene, 2019; Skeffrey, 2023).

Boatner et al. (2021) endorsed formal mentorship programs to build personal relationships with influential leaders. However, informal mentorships that developed naturally through work groups or shared interests were more effective (Roberts & Mayo, 2019). In addition, mentors helped employees develop business acumen and navigate internal company politics (Boatner et al., 2021; Roberts & Mayo, 2019). Mentor/mentee relationships also provided a supportive outlet where Black protégés could safely discuss issues and offer candid opinions (Creary, 2020; Greene, 2019).

Unique Challenges Experienced by African American Leaders in Executive Roles

African American leaders who have ascended to the executive level face additional challenges unique to their roles. These challenges included unequal pay, negative investor reactions, tokenization, and racial battle fatigue. The following subsections offer a discussion of each of these challenges.

Unequal Pay

The minority wage gap has been studied extensively and documented by prior research (Jafari et al., 2020). On average, Black men were compensated 31% less than White men annually across industries in 2010 (Kahn-Lang, 2019). However, no statistically significant differences were found between the pay ratios of minority and White male CEOs (Alan et al., 2020). Although pay for Black male executives has risen to equal that of White male executives, significant differences exist, especially for Black women; Black women make only .63 cents for every dollar a White man makes (Boatner et al., 2021).

Skeffrey (2023) found that Black female executives were not compensated at comparable rates when their experience and education matched principles in the same firm. Additionally, Black female executives were denied titles commensurate to their work (Skeffrey, 2023). Concerningly, Black women will not reach equality in pay until the year 2119, whereas White women are projected to reach equal pay rates within 36 years (Skeffrey, 2023).

Investor Reactions

In addition to unequal pay, prior research has shown that African American leaders must contend with investors' and key stakeholders' reactions (Gligor et al., 2021; Jeong et al., 2021). The relevant literature yielded mixed results. Gligor et al. (2021) found that investors reacted more negatively to the announcement of Black CEO and top team member appointments than to White CEO and top team member appointments. The researchers determined that stock markets decreased by 4.31% following the announcement of a Black appointment compared to an increase of .58% following the announcement of a White appointment (Gligor et al., 2021). Negativity increased when the incoming CEO was both Black and female (Jeong et al., 2021).

Gligor et al. (2021) theorized that the different reactions stemmed from investors' racial biases and stereotypes. To confirm and understand Gligor et al.'s (2021) findings, Jeong et al. (2021) replicated the prior study but eliminated top team member appointments, focusing solely on Black CEO appointments. The researchers found that markets increased by +2% when controlling for extreme positive outliers (Jeong et al., 2021). Jeong et al. (2021) attributed the positive reactions to Black CEO appointments to the rigorous standards African American leaders hold; Black leaders who attain senior roles

must demonstrate exceptional qualifications compared to their White counterparts. The Black CEOs examined in Jeong et al.'s (2021) study had, on average, 1.6 years more education, 40% more advanced degrees, and 17% more elite degrees than the matched pair sample of White CEOs.

Tokenization

Tokenization within an organizational system refers to the recruitment of a small number of people from underrepresented groups to give the appearance of satisfying diversification goals (Adejumo, 2021). Implying that an employee is a token hire is a microaggression that diminishes the qualifications of Black leaders who have earned promotions (Creary, 2020). Black leaders who are tokenized may engage in racial code-switching to appease organizational expectations that they assimilate into a predominantly White culture (Adejumo, 2021). Black women who are tokenized in the workplace experience the intersectionality of race and gender-based discrimination (Dickens et al., 2019). These women may shift their identities to mitigate the adverse outcomes associated with discrimination (Dickens et al., 2019).

Prior research indicated that Black leaders felt tokenized when they were expected to serve as the representative and authority of their race (Bizzell, 2023). Frequent requests to serve on diversity and inclusion committees elicited resentment (Bizzell, 2023; Salmon, 2022). Such additional work was unpaid and unmatched by White colleagues (Salmon, 2022).

Racial Battle Fatigue

Racial battle fatigue is a term coined to explain the psychosocial stress responses that occur from the cumulative effects of microaggressions in anti-Black misogynistic

environments (Corbin et al., 2018; Hollis, 2018). Symptoms of racial battle fatigue included feelings of frustration, sadness, anxiety, hopelessness, helplessness, irritability, defensiveness, shock, and anger (Corbin et al., 2018; Hollis, 2018). Shah et al. (2022) noted that participants of their study who were educational leaders working to promote social justice disclosed feeling emotionally exhausted from navigating a system opposed to change. Racial battle fatigue may also stem from expectations to represent a minority group in diversity programs (Roberts & Mayo, 2019).

In addition to the adverse impact on Black leaders and employees, racial battle fatigue was also found to have negative consequences for organizations (Farmanesh et al., 2020). Prior research has identified a significant relationship between emotional tiredness and organizational performance (Farmanesh et al., 2020). Some Black leaders confessed that their ability to contribute was diminished from the emotional tax associated with a heightened sense of difference (Roberts & Mayo, 2019). Thus, racial battle fatigue is a moderating factor negatively impacting organizational outcomes through emotional tiredness (Farmanesh et al., 2020; Roberts & Mayo, 2019).

Coping Strategies of African American Leaders in Executive Roles

Despite evidence of ongoing racism in the workplace, high-achieving African Americans have overcome discrimination and unfavorable circumstances (Sisco, 2020). African American leaders have employed several coping strategies to deal with racially driven barriers and symptoms of racial battle fatigue (Shah et al., 2022; Small, 2020). One coping mechanism is a reliance on spirituality (Skeffrey, 2023; Small, 2020). Black male and female executives may rely on spirituality and faith to build self-determination and resiliency to overcome racially driven barriers (Skeffrey, 2023; Small, 2020).

Another coping mechanism identified from the literature was maintaining focus on social justice platforms (Greene, 2019). In a study by Greene (2019), participants used their position to bring awareness to racial inequities and advocate for more diversity in senior-level positions. Still, others relied on networking relationships they had built to combat feelings of isolation (Shah et al., 2022). Finally, Black women leaders in business adopted labels to celebrate their achievements (Skeffrey, 2023). Labels including *change agent*, *firestarter*, *resilient*, and *boss lady* enabled Black women leaders to combat the demoralizing stereotypes that they encountered in environments plagued by systemic racism (Skeffrey, 2023).

Efforts to Increase African American Executives in Fortune 500 Companies

There have been several initiatives to increase the number of Black corporate executives within Fortune 500 companies. The Executive Leadership Council (ELC) was formed with this goal in mind (Spriggs, 2020). The ELC comprises Black corporate executives and top-tier entrepreneurs, either current or former CEOs or executives within one or two reports of their CEOs at Fortune 1000 companies (Spriggs, 2020). In addition to advocating for more Black C-suite executives and board members, the organization works to prepare the next generation of African American leaders by maintaining open channels of opportunity for the development of Black executives and Black entrepreneurs (Spriggs, 2020).

Other methods to promote equity in the workplace have included Fortune 500 companies, such as Nike and Starbucks, that have incorporated social justice messages into their advertising despite backlash from consumers (Roberts & Mayo, 2019). IBM highlighted obstacles faced by Black women in leadership roles and Black women's fight for social

justice (Boatner et al., 2021). Corporate leaders have also committed to providing safe spaces to discuss race, unconscious bias, and methods to promote diversity (Boatner et al., 2021; Roberts & Mayo, 2019). However, Roberts and Mayo (2019) cautioned that formal and informal discussions would require a top-down directive as prior research indicated that only White men in senior manager roles are not penalized for championing diversity. Signaling specific interest in employee diversity was found to more than double the number of minority applicants for open positions, thereby increasing the probability that a minority candidate might be chosen (Flory et al., 2021).

Summary and Conclusions

The extant literature on U.S. diversity and racism underscored the unfortunate ongoing prevalence of racism within organizational systems built on White hegemony, including in Fortune 500 companies (Adejumo, 2021). African Americans still face several barriers that impede their efforts to rise to senior-level positions and executive roles within Fortune 500 companies. These barriers included discrimination in the form of stereotyping (Greene, 2019; Livingston & Rosette, 2020), microaggressions (Corbin et al., 2018; Creary, 2020; Fattoracci et al., 2020), bullying (Hollis, 2018; Jordan-Zachery, 2019; Pyke, 2018), gender paradox (Greene, 2019; Sales et al., 2019), marginalization (Coqual, 2019; Skeffrey, 2023), exclusionary hiring and promoting practices (Creary, 2020), education disparity (Roberts et al., 2019; Wingfield & Chavez, 2020), individual valance (Coqual, 2019), and cultural differences (Feldman, 2019; Shah et al., 2022).

Some African Americans have overcome these barriers and attained elite positions within Fortune 500 companies. These select individuals benefitted from resilience (Skeffrey, 2023; Small, 2020), a motivation to lead (Badura et al., 2020), higher education (Greene,

2019), and exposure to resources and mentors (Greene, 2019; Skeffrey, 2023). However, some African American leaders still faced unique challenges, including unequal pay (Alan et al., 2020), adverse investor reactions (Gligor et al., 2021), tokenization (Dickens et al., 2019), and racial battle fatigue (Hollis, 2018; Shah et al., 2022). To cope with the cumulative effects of discrimination in the workplace, Black executives relied on spirituality (Skeffrey, 2023; Small, 2020), focus on social justice (Greene, 2019), supportive relationships (Shah et al., 2022), and positive, self-affirming labels (Skeffrey, 2023).

Efforts to increase the representation of African Americans in the C-suites of Fortune 500 companies have included forming specialized organizations like the ELC (Spriggs, 2020), efforts by Fortune 500 companies to bring awareness to social justice issues (Boatner et al., 2021; Roberts & Mayo, 2019), and commitments from corporate leaders to promote meaningful conversation within organizations for benefit of equity in the workplace (Boatner et al., 2021; Roberts & Mayo, 2019). Despite these efforts, African Americans remain highly underrepresented in corporate leadership positions (Randel et al., 2021). Thus, prior researchers have requested additional research to understand further the practices that African Americans perceive as viable for seeking promotion and the benefits and drawbacks of these tactics (Smith et al., 2019). Roberts and Mayo (2019) stated,

Rather than looking to the few Black leaders who have succeeded as exemplars of exceptionalism who have beaten almost insurmountable odds, we must learn from their insights and experiences along with the experiences of those who didn't make it to the top. (p. 17)

The present study addressed this call for further research by describing the lived experiences of corporate midlevel African Americans' difficulties in seeking and maintaining senior leadership positions in Fortune 500 companies.

The following chapter further justifies the research design and rationale for the present study. In addition, my role as the researcher and methodology are described. Further, the logic underpinning the participant selection is offered, including procedures for recruitment, participation, and data collection. Finally, concerns over potential issues of trustworthiness are shared.

Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the collective experiences of African Americans regarding seeking promotions and maintaining corporate leadership roles in Fortune 500 companies in the United States, as well as to compare the collective experiences of male and female African Americans. The previous chapter, Chapter 2, reviewed the literature. Among other things, Chapter 2 established the importance of the collective experience amongst African Americans (e.g., Selvanathan et al., 2023). This importance shaped the present study's focus on collective experiences. The literature also highlighted that these collective experiences may differ by gender (e.g., Townsend, 2021).

Chapter 3 presents the research methodology. Chapter 3 begins with a discussion of the research design and rationale, followed by the role of the researcher. Next is the logic for identifying participants, followed by the research instrumentation. The data collection is discussed after the instrumentation, followed by the data analysis approach. Chapter 3 concludes with a discussion of trustworthiness and a summary.

Research Design and Rationale

The present study was guided by a single, overarching qualitative research question plus two subquestions:

RQ: What are the collective experiences of corporate midlevel African Americans in seeking promotions and maintaining senior leadership positions in Fortune 500 companies?

SQ1: What are the collective experiences of corporate midlevel African American men in seeking promotions and maintaining senior leadership positions in Fortune 500 companies?

SQ2: What are the collective experiences of corporate midlevel African American women in seeking promotions and maintaining senior leadership positions in Fortune 500 companies?

The central phenomenon of interest for the study was the collective experiences of corporate midlevel African Americans in seeking and maintaining senior leadership positions in Fortune 500 companies. The specific facet of this phenomenon that I focused on was the lived experiences of corporate midlevel African Americans in Fortune 500 companies. A qualitative methodology and a transcendental phenomenology research design were used.

Qualitative research is a descriptive research approach ideal for exploring new ideas (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). In a qualitative study, a researcher explores the central research phenomenon through open-ended inquiry that helps to fully understand the issues under study from a holistic standpoint (Moen & Middelthon, 2015). Qualitative research is descriptive in that conducting a qualitative study entails collecting open-ended, descriptive data from the participants regarding their opinions, perceptions, and experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Qualitative research is highly subjective and ideal for studying inherently subjective phenomena (Moen & Middelthon, 2015). Qualitative research is contextual in that open-ended qualitative inquiry captures much of the participants' context.

A qualitative methodology was suited to this study because the study was descriptive and exploratory. The purpose of the research was to describe the lived experiences of corporate midlevel African Americans' difficulty in seeking and maintaining senior leadership positions in Fortune 500 companies. The research questions guiding the study were also open ended, aligning with a qualitative methodology. I also addressed a

deeply subjective phenomenon that was necessarily bound up in the experiences of midlevel corporate African Americans. In addition, the contextual aspect of qualitative research offered insight into how the specific context in which the participants work affected their responses. Hence, a qualitative methodology was well aligned.

By contrast, a quantitative methodology was not well aligned. Quantitative research focuses on specific variables and their relationships (Balnaves & Caputi, 2001). The present study was not concerned with specific variables but with a broad phenomenon. Quantitative research is also numerical, relying on closed-ended quantifications of data (Apuke, 2017). By contrast, this study required open-ended data that could fully describe the central phenomenon. In addition, quantitative research is intended to abstract and decontextualize the topic (Balnaves & Caputi, 2001). Conversely, this study benefitted from the inclusion of contextualizing information. Hence, a quantitative research methodology was poorly aligned.

The specific research design was phenomenological. Phenomenology is a qualitative research design used to explore a phenomenon through the lived experiences of the study participants, gathering rich and deep data (Moustakas, 1994). In phenomenology, a researcher seeks to understand the experiences of each participant deeply and uses those experiences to build an understanding of the essence of the shared experience (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003). Therefore, phenomenological design offers particular depth unassociated with other qualitative approaches.

Phenomenology was appropriate to the present study as the research was intended to deeply explore African Americans' lived experiences with the issues shaping their decisions to seek promotion or maintain corporate leadership positions. I focused on the

participants' in-depth experiences with the phenomenon and why those experiences gave rise to difficulties with promotion. I aimed to understand the participants' subjective experiences, making phenomenology the best design.

As stated, a transcendental approach to phenomenology was employed.

Transcendental phenomenology is used when a researcher seeks to understand a phenomenon in a pure sense outside researcher biases (Moustakas, 1994). To aid in this endeavor, I kept a reflexive journal and detailed notes used as audit trails. In this way, researcher biases were mitigated to the extent possible.

Other qualitative designs were less appropriate for this study. For example, a case study is a contextual qualitative design that focuses on one or more specific cases (Yin, 2017). Although context was important in this study, focusing on specific cases would offer narrower and less useful data. Narrative inquiry addresses participants' stories (Wells, 2011). Although a narrative inquiry afforded similar depth to phenomenology, this study was concerned with the overall events experience, not their narrative sequence. Finally, grounded theory builds new theory from scratch (Strauss & Corbin, 1997). However, this study did not require grounded theory as an existing framework supported the study.

Role of the Researcher

In qualitative research, the role of the researcher is to be the primary instrument of data collection (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Hence, the role of the researcher in this study was as such an instrument. Beyond the data collection instrument, I acted as an impartial observer. A key part of transcendental phenomenology is managing expectations and biases (Moustakas, 1994). This process is called *bracketing* and putting on the *epochs* to view the data with new eyes (Moustakas, 1994). To this end, I focused on identifying all personal

biases and expectations and setting them aside using a reflexive journal per the recommendations of Moustakas (1994). Additionally, I kept detailed notes used as an audit trail. Biases and expectations could have stemmed from my race, professional experience, the literature encountered in preparing for the study, and broader cultural narratives.

As the data collection was carried out broadly, I was not expected to have any preexisting relationships with the study participants. Any potential participants I knew or who worked at the same organization were excluded from the study. Therefore, no conflicts of interest or ethical issues were expected to arise because of my positionality relative to that of the study participants.

Methodology

Participant Selection Logic

The broad population of interest was corporate midlevel African Americans. In this context, midlevel was defined as having a professional position characterized as in some way managerial or leadership oriented. At the same time, corporate midlevel African Americans did not hold high-level positions, including executive- or senior-level positions. These individuals were beyond the bottom levels of the organization but had not yet reached senior-level positions. Per the research purpose, the population had two key subsets of male and female corporate midlevel African Americans.

Within the overall population, the specific target population was corporate midlevel African Americans working at U.S. Fortune 500 companies. The use of Fortune 500 companies was because they were, by definition, the largest in the United States; they were considered indicative of the corporate world, and they had a deficient representation of African Americans at the top leadership levels. The inclusion criteria were that participants

(a) be at least 18 years of age, (b) be employed at a Fortune 500 company, (c) have at least 1 year of experience in a midlevel position, (d) identify as African American, and (e) be legally permitted to discuss issues relating to promotion (i.e., not bound by nondisclosure agreements). Again, per the research purpose, the target population had two key subsets of male and female corporate midlevel African Americans.

Sampling for the study was purposive. Purposive sampling involves identifying and recruiting participants specifically for their ability to address the research question (Etikan et al., 2016). Purposive sampling is often used in qualitative research to ensure that the small sample size offers maximum insight. The preliminary sample size for the study was 20 participants; however, the final sample was 14, with seven men and seven women. Per Giorgi and Giorgi (2003), phenomenological research typically involves smaller sample sizes than other qualitative designs to ensure each participant's responses are meaningfully included in the results.

The final sample size was determined by saturation, making the sample size different from the preliminary size first expected. Saturation is when new participants no longer contribute new data to the study (Mason, 2010). Saturation was assessed by preliminary, *ad hoc* analysis during the data collection. In addition, comparable numbers of male and female participants were sought to allow for comparison.

Participants were recruited through LinkedIn and UserInterviews.com to achieve the purposive sampling strategy. After receiving site authorization from LinkedIn, I identified prospective participants by their LinkedIn profiles. The prospective participants represented the broadest possible range of demographic characteristics while remaining within the inclusion criteria. Each prospective participant was contacted individually by

messaging him or her on LinkedIn with information about the study. Inclusion criteria were confirmed by asking those interested in participating to confirm that they met the inclusion criteria in their response, notifying me that they were interested in participating in the study.

If using LinkedIn failed to yield enough participants, a second sampling strategy was used: snowball sampling. Snowball sampling is used when previously recruited participants help me find suitable participants (Parker et al., 2019). Additionally, UserInterviews.com was used if purposive and snowball sampling failed to yield enough participants.

Instrumentation

Beyond me, the sole data collection instrument was qualitative semistructured interviews. Per Moustakas (1994), in-depth, open-ended interviews are the ideal data collection method for phenomenology. These interviews produced in-depth qualitative data and were guided by an interview guide (see Appendix A) to ensure the data collected by the present study were appropriate for answering the research questions. I developed the interview guide for the present study.

Qualitative interviews have long been the primary source of data for qualitative research. The semistructured interview is versatile, offering flexibility and structure to the interview process, and the interview guide affords structure (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021). In the present study, the interview guide contained a list of critical topics that the interview must address to answer the research questions. The interview guide also contained preliminary questions (see Kallio et al., 2016). The flexibility of the semistructured interview approach derived from me not needing to be constrained by the preliminary questions in the interview guide. Instead, I remained free to ask follow-up,

clarification, and probe questions for the participant to generally expound on a particular topic (see Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021). As a result, such interviews captured the essential data for the study.

The interview guide was developed concerning the literature. In particular, the interview guide consisted of 10 to 15 preliminary questions developed based on the overall topic of research and the findings in prior studies. The interview questions began in the most general way possible, allowing the participants to respond based on their thoughts. Then, later questions asked the participants if they experienced specific difficulties with promotion highlighted in the literature and, if so, how those specific difficulties affected their experiences. In this way, the questions addressed the literature without biasing the participants' initial responses derived from their experiences.

The interview guide was validated by expert review. The review process involved recruiting a panel of three experts from within the university, potentially the same as the dissertation committee. These experts reviewed the questions and topics in the guide to ensure appropriate wording and content validity (see Kallio et al., 2016). The interview guide was revised based on the experts' feedback. In addition, though no formal pilot test was conducted, the expert panel members were asked to participate in an informal field test of the interview. This informal field test served to ascertain the volume of data that the interview guide produced while ensuring that the interviews yielded data sufficient in quality and volume to answer the central research questions of the study meaningfully.

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

Data collection for the present study was carried out as follows. First, site authorization to collect data was obtained from the professional networking platform

LinkedIn. A copy of the site authorization letter is in Appendix B. After LinkedIn obtained approval, the study was submitted for institutional research board (IRB) approval through Walden University. IRB approval served to ensure that the study was ethical and feasible. IRB information is in Appendix C. Any changes required by the IRB for the study to be approved were made.

Once IRB approval was obtained, data collection commenced. I selected U.S. Fortune 500 companies at random to identify prospect participants. The names of the companies were kept anonymous. LinkedIn profiles of employees from selected companies were searched to identify prospective participants. When identifying participants, an effort was made to roughly balance the number of male and female potential participants identified and contacted. Prospective participants from companies other than those already recruited were increasingly prioritized as data collection proceeds. Once a prospective participant was identified, they were contacted by private message on LinkedIn (Appendix D). The message contained key information about the study, including its purposes, potential positive social change implications, inclusion criteria, and participation. Participants replied to my message indicating their interest and that they met the inclusion criteria if they were interested in participating. Once identified, a prospective participant was given 2 weeks (14 days) to respond before they were removed from the prospective participant pool.

Once a participant confirmed inclusion criteria and indicated interest, they were sent informed consent information. The informed consent form (see Appendix E) contained more detailed information about the study, its purpose, what was required of participants, and how to withdraw. Participants received the informed consent form through DocuSign, an e-signature service. They needed to sign and confirm the informed consent through

DocuSign to participate. Once a participant returned the informed consent, an interview was scheduled at a time convenient to them.

Each interview was conducted virtually via Zoom. The interviews were expected to last 60 to 90 minutes with each participant. Though one interview was expected initially, multiple were conducted if the participant had more to convey. Each interview was recorded using Zoom's built-in recording feature. I transcribed each interview within 1 week of conducting it and emailed a copy of the transcript to the participant for member checking. Each participant had 14 days to review, correct, and member check their transcript. An ad hoc preliminary analysis was conducted on a rolling basis during the data collection to determine when the saturation point was reached, at which point additional participants were no longer sought. However, any interviews that had already been scheduled were still conducted.

Data Analysis Plan

Data analysis for the present study entailed using qualitative thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is a six-step process to extract key themes from qualitative data (Clarke et al., 2015). Hence, the thematic analysis was used phenomenally to elicit the essence of the shared experience from the data. The data analysis was carried out using NVivo qualitative analysis software. The software was used to help categorize data and manage codes; I did all the actual analysis.

The analysis was conducted three times. In the first iteration, the overall analysis was conducted to understand the collective experiences of African Americans. Then, the subsets of data from male and female participants were again analyzed separately to assess if they seemed to differ materially in their constituent themes.

Step 1

The first step of thematic analysis was to build familiarity. Establishing familiarity is key as it ensures that the remainder of the analysis is firmly grounded in the data rather than my expectations (Clarke et al., 2015). Each transcript was reviewed at least twice before commencing the complete analysis and more times if necessary to achieve grounding.

Step 2

The second step of thematic analysis was open coding. Open coding identifies essential ideas and concepts in each place they appear across the data set (Clarke et al., 2015). These instances of essential ideas were labeled with a code. The codes were assigned using a codebook. Before the analysis, the initial codebook was developed to include the expected codes based on the prior literature. However, emergent codes were added to the codebook based on their occurrence in the data.

Step 3

The third step of thematic analysis was developing preliminary themes. Themes represent more significant ideas than codes, usually encompassing two or more codes (Clarke et al., 2015). Therefore, themes were identified by assessing the occurrence of codes in the data, both individually and relative to one another. These patterns in the codes were used to derive themes. Each theme must have clear relevance to the research questions.

Step 4

Once the themes were identified, they were validated. The validation of themes is carefully checking each theme against the data (Clarke et al., 2015). This step ensured that

direct quotes from the data clearly and authoritatively supported each theme. Validating the themes was essential for ensuring the analysis results remained trustworthy.

Step 5

The fifth step was naming the themes. In this step, a researcher must compare the themes against each other (Clarke et al., 2015). Any insufficiently developed themes relative to the other themes must then be combined with others or redeveloped. Similarly, any themes that contained no unique ideas were combined with others. Then, each remaining theme was given a name that conveys its essence (see Clarke et al., 2015).

Step 6

The final step in the qualitative thematic analysis was to compile the themes. In this step, each theme from the results was listed. The themes must then be recontextualized by discussing their relevance to the literature (Clarke et al., 2015). The themes should also be reviewed in their original context—that is, regarding their relevance to and implications for the study's specific context. These aspects of the analysis are done in Chapters 4 and 5 of the study.

Issues of Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is the qualitative version of validity and reliability. There are four components of trustworthiness. These components are addressed in this section.

Credibility

Credibility corresponds to internal validity. Hence, credibility reflects the extent to which a study is internally consistent with itself (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Credibility was achieved in several ways in this study. First, the components of the study were carefully

aligned. The research problem gave rise to the research purpose, and the purpose led to the research questions. The research questions informed the interview guide. Second, member checking and transcript review helped to ensure credibility. Ensuring the participants' intentions were accurately captured in the interviews made it possible to ensure the results reflected the underlying data.

Transferability

Transferability corresponds to external validity; hence, transferability reflects the ability of future researchers to apply the results (Moen & Middelthon, 2015). However, in a qualitative study, a researcher's only responsibility for transferability is to document the circumstances under which the data are collected (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Hence, transferability was assured in three ways in the present study. First, this chapter details the sampling. Second, Chapter 4 presents a description of the sample. Finally, Chapter 5 addresses the limitations of the sampling.

Dependability

Dependability corresponds to reliability; hence, dependability reflects the ability of a future researcher to gain the same results (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Because the data would never be the same between two qualitative studies, a more helpful way to understand dependability was relative to the analysis. In this regard, the careful description of the analysis in the prior section ensured that any future researcher using the same data could replicate the analysis. Step 4 of the analysis also served to help further develop dependability by ensuring the analysis reflected only the data and nothing else.

Confirmability

Confirmability corresponds to objectivity; confirmability reflects that the study was conducted unbiasedly (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). The careful use of phenomenological bracketing served to establish confirmability. The transcendental phenomenological tradition maintained that strong confirmability was possible by identifying my biases, preconceptions, and expectations through the bracketing process (see Moustakas, 1994). Moreover, documenting the bracketing process should instill confidence in the reader regarding the study's confirmability.

Ethical Procedures

Ethical research practices were adhered to throughout the study. No data were collected before both IRB approval and site authorization. All participants completed informed consent before they participated in the study. The confidentiality of participants was assured through the assignment of codenames and the careful removal of any identifying information from the data. Only the approved university personnel, such as the dissertation committee and IRB, and I had access to identifying information for participants. All data were stored securely. Data were kept on an encrypted USB drive. The USB drive and any physical data were stored securely in a locked file cabinet drawer when not in use. All data will be maintained for 5 years after publication of the study, then entirely destroyed by burning.

The present study addressed potentially sensitive topics regarding promotion. However, these data were collected without any involvement of the participants' employers, meaning there was expected to be only minimal risk associated with participation. Otherwise, the participants were not considered a vulnerable population. To ensure that the

study's results were unbiased, I deeply engaged with the process of phenomenological bracketing.

Summary

In summary, the purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the collective experiences of African Americans regarding seeking promotions and maintaining corporate leadership roles in Fortune 500 companies in the United States, as well as to compare the collective experiences of male and female African Americans. The present study was guided by a single, overarching qualitative research question plus two subquestions:

RQ: What are the collective experiences of corporate midlevel African Americans in seeking promotions and maintaining senior leadership positions in Fortune 500 companies?

SQ1: What are the collective experiences of corporate midlevel African American men in seeking promotions and maintaining senior leadership positions in Fortune 500 companies?

SQ2: What are the collective experiences of corporate midlevel African American women in seeking promotions and maintaining senior leadership positions in Fortune 500 companies?

The phenomenon of interest for the study was the collective experiences of corporate midlevel African Americans in seeking and maintaining senior leadership positions in Fortune 500 companies. The focus on collective experiences, rather than just individual experiences, was necessary to understand fully the phenomenon's state amongst African Americans (see Selvanathan et al., 2023). These collective experiences might have also been shaped in gendered ways that were important to understand (see Townsend, 2021). I used a qualitative transcendental phenomenology.

The broad population of interest was corporate midlevel African Americans. Within the overall population, the specific target population was corporate midlevel African Americans working at U.S. Fortune 500 companies. Sampling for the study was purposive. The preliminary sample size for the study was 20 participants. Beyond me, the sole data collection instrument was qualitative semistructured interviews. I developed the interview guide for the present study, and data analysis for the present study involved qualitative thematic analysis. Next, in Chapter 4, the data collection and analysis results are presented.

Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the collective experiences of African Americans regarding seeking promotions and maintaining corporate leadership roles in Fortune 500 companies in the United States, as well as to compare the collective experiences of male and female African Americans. The design of this study was phenomenological to meet the objective of fully understanding the participants' subjective experiences. The central phenomenon investigated in this study was the experiences of corporate midlevel African Americans in seeking and maintaining senior leadership positions in Fortune 500 companies. I focused on the difficulties experienced by corporate midlevel African Americans in Fortune 500 companies. Chapter 3 contained the research methodology and the rationale supporting the appropriateness of the research methods. This chapter contains the presentation of the data analysis and results. The research questions that guided this study included the following:

RQ: What are the collective experiences of corporate midlevel African Americans in seeking promotions and maintaining senior leadership positions in Fortune 500 companies?

SQ1: What are the collective experiences of corporate midlevel African American men in seeking promotions and maintaining senior leadership positions in Fortune 500 companies?

SQ2: What are the collective experiences of corporate midlevel African American women in seeking promotions and maintaining senior leadership positions in Fortune 500 companies?

The presentation of data analysis and results in this chapter begins with a description of the sample of 14 corporate midlevel African Americans working at U.S.

Fortune 500 companies with a subset of seven men and seven women. The data collection and data analysis processes are also reported in this chapter. Descriptions of the trustworthiness techniques applied to the methodology are included. The results are then presented as themes that answered the research questions.

Demographics

The study sample was 14 corporate, midlevel African Americans working at U.S. Fortune 500 companies with a subset of seven men and seven women. The participants were selected from User Interviews using purposive sampling. The recruitment of the participants was continuous and simultaneous with the data collection and preliminary data analysis processes to determine whether saturation had been reached. Data saturation was confirmed with fewer new initial codes; thus, more data were analyzed until no new code emerged (see Mason, 2010). With preliminary analysis, only two to three new codes emerged from the data collected from the sixth male and the sixth female participants; no new codes emerged from the data collected from the seventh male and seventh female participants. Thus, the sample of 14 participants was sufficient to reach saturation.

Screening the participants involved filtering the *User Interviews* profiles of midlevel African Americans employed at one of the randomly selected U.S. Fortune 500 companies. Using the messaging feature of User Interviews, I sent a letter of introduction to the study and an invitation to participate in the data collection process to prospective participants (see Appendix D). The message contained descriptions about me, the nature and purpose of the study, and the eligibility criteria, which were: (a) be at least 18 years of age, (b) be employed at a Fortune 500 company, (c) have at least 1 year of experience in a midlevel position, (d) identify as African American, and (e) be legally permitted to discuss issues

relating to promotion (i.e., not bound by nondisclosure agreements). These criteria were also made known to the participants upon the initial contact and in the informed consent form (see Appendix E).

Of the seven male participants, four were aged 40–49, and three were aged 30–39. Among the seven female participants, five were aged 30–39, one was aged 20–29, and one was aged 40–49. The highest educational attainment of the participants was a master’s degree. Three male participants and two female participants had master’s degrees. Four male and four female participants had bachelor’s degrees. One female participant had an associate degree. The participants held different midlevel roles, including being a team lead and a senior manager, but none of the participants were at the executive level. The participants’ tenure at their current midlevel management roles ranged from 3 months to 6 years. Their tenure in the corporate setting ranged from 2.5 to 26 years, with an average of 11.86 years. All the participants reported having a goal of advancing their careers with target roles, including senior management to executive roles. Table 1 summarizes the participants’ descriptive information.

Table 1*Descriptive Information*

Participant	Sex	Age bracket	Highest education	Midlevel role	Tenure in current role	Years in corporate setting	Target role
M1	M	40–49	Bachelor's degree	Lead	6 years	15	Supervisor
M2	M	30–39	Master's degree	Manager	4 years	10	Director
M3	M	40–49	Master's degree	Lead	6 months	21	Manager
M4	M	40–49	Bachelor's degree	Senior specialist	3 months	7	Manager
M5	M	30–39	Bachelor's degree	Supervisor	5 months	5.5	Manager
M6	M	30–39	Master's degree	Manager	6 months	9	Senior manager
M7	M	40–49	Bachelor's degree	Senior manager	1.5 years	26	Director
F1	F	30–39	Bachelor's degree	Senior specialist	2.5 years	2.5	Vice president
F2	F	30–39	Bachelor's degree	Manager	1 year	15	Director
F3	F	30–39	Bachelor's degree	Operations analyst	3 years	15	Manager
F4	F	20–29	Associate degree	Manager	3 years	5	Executive manager
F5	F	40–49	Bachelor's degree	Senior specialist	6 years	22	Director
F6	F	30–39	Master's degree	Coordinator	1.5 years	8	Manager
F7	F	30–39	Master's degree	Senior specialist	5 years	5	Manager

Data Collection

All 14 participants joined the individual semistructured interviews. The participants submitted a digitally signed informed consent form using DocuSign. The contents of the informed consent form were initially discussed during the screening. Signing a digital copy of the informed consent form was a requirement to document that the participants were aware of and agreed to the terms and conditions of participating in this study. The

participants were asked for their preferred interview schedules after submitting the signed informed consent form.

All the interviews were conducted online using the videoconferencing platform Zoom. All the interviews were recorded with the consent of the participants for data collection and analysis. The duration of each interview was between 45 and 60 minutes. All the participants were interviewed once, as no follow-up interview was needed. Although the interviews were ongoing, participant selection continued, and an ad hoc preliminary analysis was conducted as part of the data saturation process. An interview guide was used to guide the interview flow, but the semistructured nature of questioning allowed for eliciting more in-depth information through probing questions. Probing questions included asking for an elaboration of interview responses and specific examples of experiences relevant to the response to the interview questions.

I transcribed the interview recordings verbatim by listening to the Zoom recordings and using Microsoft Word to save the transcriptions. The transcripts were sent to the corresponding participant's email for their review and verification of the accuracy as part of the member-checking process. A total of 175 pages of transcripts were generated from all 14 interviews. During the *ad hoc* preliminary analysis, saturation had been reached by the seventh male and seventh female interview data. The data were finalized and imported to NVivo v.14 software in preparation for data analysis.

Data Analysis

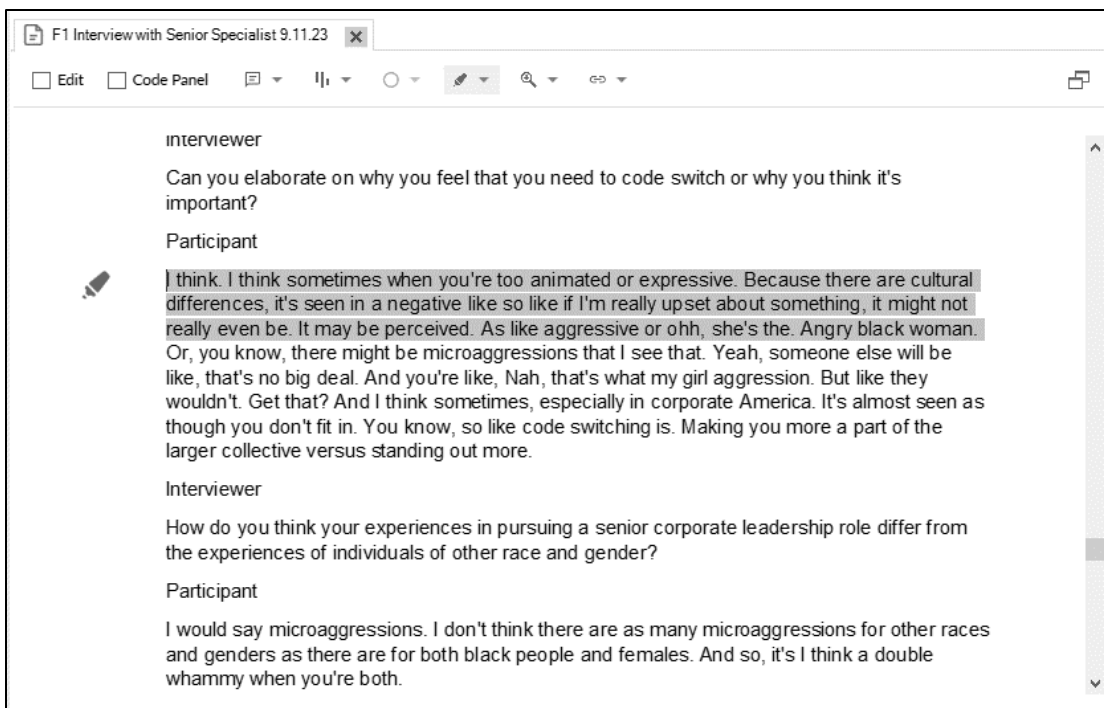
The data analysis process adhered to Clarke et al.'s (2015) six-step thematic analysis process. The six steps entailed (a) building familiarity, (b) performing open coding, (c) developing preliminary themes, (d) validating themes, (e) naming themes, and (f) compiling

themes. The qualitative analysis software NVivo v.14 was used to store, manage, and organize the data during the analysis. NVivo had a code and hierarchy feature that helped visually represent the analysis. This section contains a description of how the data analysis process occurred.

Step 1, building familiarity, involved prolonged immersion in the data. I conducted 14 interviews and the verbatim transcription of the interviews. After the member-checking process, I read the whole data set twice to grasp broad patterns across the data. During this step, the most common collective experiences of the participants became apparent. However, at this step, no thematic meanings were assigned to the broad patterns of collective experiences as this step aimed to understand the data as a whole.

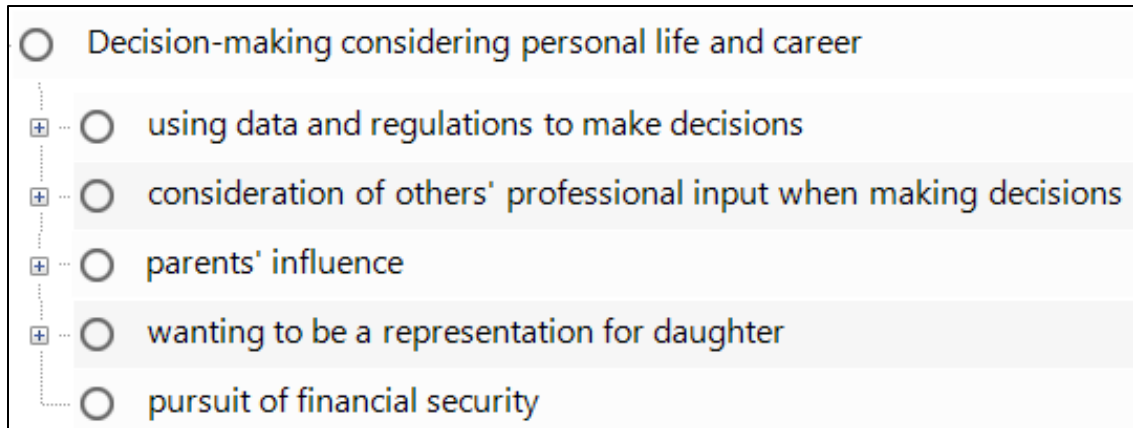
Step 2 was open coding. The transcripts were closely read line-by-line in search of ideas relevant to the research questions. The ideas consisted of a chunk of text related to the research questions and a short description or a code assigned to label the chunk of text. Appendix F contains a code book containing open codes and sample excerpts of texts from the interview transcripts. Figure 1 contains an example of a chunk of text from participant F1's interview transcript highlighted and coded under *angry Black woman* using NVivo. The chunk of text refers to the participant's experience of being stereotyped because of being African American.

Figure 1
Sample Coding in NVivo



Note. This figure is a screenshot from NVivo v.14, illustrating a segment of F1's transcript with a highlighted excerpt assigned to a code.

Step 3 was to identify preliminary themes. The themes comprised broader and more abstract ideas than codes (see Clarke et al., 2015). Abstracting the codes meant a higher level of analysis involving searching for how the codes were related. Relationships among the codes included similar phenomena, conflicting ideas, causal conditions, and sequential events (see Strauss & Corbin, 1997). A codebook with preliminary codes can be found in Appendix F. Figure 2 shows a screenshot from NVivo showing an example of a hierarchy containing codes and a preliminary theme.

Figure 2*Sample NVivo Hierarchy of Codes*

Note. Figure 2 is a screenshot from NVivo v.14 showing a sample hierarchy of codes.

Step 4 was to validate the themes. This step was essential to the confirmability of the study, as the preliminary themes were cross-referenced with the interview transcripts to show how the results were grounded in the data and not from my bias. Theme validation involved the selection of direct quotes from the data to support the results. This step also entailed aligning the themes to the research questions. Thus, the preliminary themes were developed into themes (see Table 2).

Table 2*Preliminary Themes to Themes*

Preliminary themes	Themes
Female African American midlevel managers seeking internal and external support	Differences between men and women when seeking support to navigate workplace challenges
Male African American midlevel managers seeking leader and mentor support	
Advocating for oneself to address workplace challenges	Navigating workplace challenges through advocating for oneself
Code switching to address workplace challenges	Code switching to make others comfortable and oneself relatable
Discrimination at the workplace	Experiences of discrimination in unfair standards and opportunities at the workplace
Attacked and disrespected	Experiences of blatant attacks and disrespect at the workplace
Stereotyped at the workplace	Experiences of being stereotyped as aggressive at the workplace
Lack of guidance and support	Experiences of lack of guidance and support in pursuing career growth
Decision making based on consequences	Making career decisions based on considering consequences as a male African American midlevel manager
Decision making involving leaders and mentors	Making career decisions based on inputs of leaders and mentors as a male African American midlevel manager
Decision making considering personal life and career	Considerations of personal life and professional resources when making decisions as a female African American midlevel manager

Step 5 was to name the themes. Naming the themes was a process of contrasting the themes relative to each other to determine if all themes were sufficiently developed (see Clarke et al., 2015). Comparison of the themes was critical in ensuring that each theme was distinct. Each distinct theme was given a unique name that captures the essence conveyed (see Clarke et al., 2015). The 11 preliminary themes were renamed and compressed into 10 final themes. Therefore, 10 final themes emerged to answer the research questions. The final themes and their definition are presented in Table 3 and described in detail in the results section.

Table 3*Final Themes*

Final themes	Definition
Differences between men and women when seeking support to navigate workplace challenges	Female African American midlevel managers seeking internal and external support, while male African American midlevel managers seek leaders' and mentors' support
Navigating workplace challenges through advocating for oneself	Obtaining credential and speaking up to prove and stand up for oneself when faced with challenges at the workplace
Code switching to make others comfortable and oneself relatable	Adjusting one's appearance and behavior to make non-Black individuals comfortable and make oneself relatable to others
Experiences of discrimination in unfair standards and opportunities at the workplace	Experiences of lack in career growth opportunities while having achievements overlooked and mistakes magnified at the workplace
Experiences of blatant attacks and disrespect at the workplace	Experiences of hostility attributed to racial discrimination at the workplace
Experiences of being stereotyped as aggressive at the workplace	Experiences of being perceived by others as aggressive because of being Black
Experiences of lack of guidance and support in pursuing career growth	Experiences of lack in representation, mentors, sponsors and advocates as African American pursuing career growth
Making career decisions based on considering consequences as a male African American midlevel manager	Male African American midlevel managers' experiences of avoiding taking things personally at the corporate setting when pursuing career advancement
Making career decisions based on inputs of leaders and mentors as a male African American midlevel manager	Male African American midlevel managers' experiences of seeking the opinions of people they consider as experts before making decisions relevant to their career
Considerations of personal life and professional resources when making decisions as a female African American midlevel manager	African American midlevel female managers' experiences of accounting for the impacts of family and professional network and information when making decisions

Step 6 was to compile the themes into a report. The report was created to recontextualize the themes regarding their relevance to the research questions (see Clarke et al., 2015). Thus, the report of the results presented in this chapter was organized logically according to the research questions.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

In Chapter 3, the issues of trustworthiness were presented. Establishing the trustworthiness of a qualitative study was essential in building a foundation for the study's

implications (see Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Evidence of trustworthiness addressing credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability is reported in this section.

Credibility

Credibility is the extent to which a study accurately presents the participants' experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Establishing credibility began with planning this study, during which the research problem was aligned with the purpose and research questions. The research design and methodology were also carefully selected to align with the nature and purpose of this study. The phenomenological design allowed for the full understanding of the participant's subjective experiences by using semistructured individual interviews to elicit in-depth information about their lived experiences regarding the issues shaping their decisions to seek promotion or maintain corporate leadership positions.

The interview protocol was reviewed and validated by an expert panel. Three experts within the university who were adept in qualitative research and corporate leadership roles in Fortune 500 companies reviewed the interview guide's appropriate wording and content validity (see Kallio et al., 2016). The experts were involved in an informal field test of the interview protocol to validate whether the protocol would elicit detailed and relevant responses from the participants.

The participants could provide detailed accounts of their lived experiences as midlevel African Americans seeking promotions and maintaining corporate leadership roles in U.S. Fortune 500 companies because of applying a purposive sampling strategy. Purposive sampling entailed using a set of eligibility criteria to select participants with characteristics relevant to the phenomenon under investigation (see Etikan et al., 2016). The transcript

verification process with the participants also increased the credibility of this study. The participants had 14 days to review and approve their interview responses.

Transferability

Transferability is the extent to which future researchers can apply the results (Moen & Middelthon, 2015). Detailed descriptions of the context of the study are vital to establishing transferability (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). The setting of the interview was described in Chapters 3 and 4. The participant selection process and the sample descriptions were also reported in Chapters 3 and 4, respectively. The limitations regarding the context of the study are reported in Chapter 5. Reporting the setting and sample of the study will allow future researchers to make inferences about the applicability of the results in a different context (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

Dependability

Dependability is the extent to which future researchers can replicate the study and expect similar results (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). The similarities in the results are not from having the same data but from having a data analysis grounded on the data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Thus, establishing dependability involved a rich and thick description of the data collection and analysis processes. The materials used to collect and analyze the data were also documented.

I used an expert-validated interview protocol (Appendix A) to guide the direction of collecting data from the participants. A script of the introduction to the data collection process was included in the interview protocol so that each participant was made aware of the nature of data collection and the protection of the participant's rights. All participants were asked six demographic questions, followed by the opening question to help them ease

into the interview. All focusing questions were asked with variations in the probing questions to elicit detailed and relevant responses from the participants. All the questions and responses were recorded, transcribed, and included in the analysis.

The utilization of Clarke et al.'s (2015) six-step thematic analysis process and NVivo qualitative data analysis software is reported in this chapter. The identification of codes and development of themes from the codes are reported. These reports show the step-by-step data analysis methods applied to all the data. Excerpts from the data are provided to support the findings.

Confirmability

Confirmability is the extent to which a study is neutral (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). The issue of confirmability was bias, which was addressed in this study using phenomenological bracketing (see Moustakas, 1994). My ideas and thought processes were documented in a reflexive journal and set aside during analysis to achieve bracketing. The codes and themes that emerged during the analysis were grounded in the data. The use of Clarke et al.'s (2015) six-step thematic analysis process, particularly Step 2 code identification and Step 4 theme review, involved cross-referencing the codes and themes to the interview transcripts to remain as close to the participants' intentions as possible. An audit trail was kept using detailed notes to track the steps taken to develop and execute the processes in this study.

Results

This section contains the report of the results. The results are organized according to the research questions to represent the collective experiences of corporate midlevel African Americans in seeking and maintaining senior leadership positions in Fortune 500

companies. The themes that emerged to answer the research questions entailed (a) seeking support, (b) navigating workplace challenges, (c) experiences of discrimination, (d) making career decisions as a male African American midlevel manager, and (e) making decisions as a female African American midlevel manager.

Overarching Research Question: Midlevel African American Managers' Collective Experiences

The collective experience among all 14 participants regarding their experiences in seeking promotions and maintaining senior leadership positions in Fortune 500 companies involved the struggles in navigating the workplace and workplace discrimination. All 14 participants shared their insights on the struggles they experienced while navigating the workplace as an African American. The struggles collectively experienced by subsets of male and female participants were reportedly on how they sought support, built relationships, advocated for themselves, and applied code switching. All 14 participants also shared having an experience of being discriminated against at the workplace. The participants' experiences of discrimination involved race, gender, and age. Seven themes emerged from the participants' experiences navigating workplace challenges and discrimination. The themes described in the following subsections entailed (a) seeking support, (b) navigating workplace challenges, (c) experiences of discrimination, (d) making career decisions as a male African American midlevel manager, and (e) making decisions as a female African American midlevel manager.

Theme 1: Seeking Support

All male and female participants stated that when navigating workplace challenges, they sought the support of other people. The slight difference in the experience of male and

female participants in seeking support was that all seven female participants sought support through building an internal and external professional network. Conversely, four male participants sought support through approaching leaders and mentors who could advocate for them.

Subtheme 1: Internal and External Support Sought by Female African American Midlevel Managers. Four female participants stated that they had strong internal support within the organization; mainly, they had the support of a seasoned Black woman. Participant F4 shared, “I actually have a mentor right now. She's an older Black woman that's been in corporate longer than me.” Participant F2 stated, “I also had a good mentor at the time that was another Black woman that gave me a lot of that guidance.” Nonetheless, the three participants did not specify whether they had strong support in the organization but had a good professional relationship with colleagues, especially in being respected for their role. Participant F5 shared,

I can say I get a lot of acknowledgment. I get a lot of respect as well. Even with me being corporate and in management, I get a lot of interaction with physicians as well as doctors, so it's a lot of respect as well.

Two female participants also added that they built their external networks for support. Participant F2 stated, “Make sure I build my network externally, right? I don't have to rely on just this one; organization is important.” Participant F1 built external networks by joining affinity groups, such as groups with forums about social issues and LGBT groups.

Subtheme 2: Leaders and Mentors Sought by Male African American Midlevel Managers. For the male participants, support was sought through approaching people who they thought could advocate for them. According to four male participants, such

people were leaders in the organization and the industry, as well as their teammates.

Participant M2 believed in seeking a mentor and seeking sponsorship:

I think sponsorship and support is needed. You need people that you can talk to and then get advice from, and to help you navigate. Then you also need people that are in the room when you're not, advocating for you, and set you up for success. I think that's definitely influenced whether or not I even think a senior leadership position is possible. Because I have to really realize I have to find those people, find my people basically, that are going to be in my corner and that is going to hold me down, support me through this.

Participant M2 also believed in involving the HR personnel when conflicts arise to seek support in addressing the issue. Participant M2 stated, "I think me going to HR, me there talking about it ... I addressed [the conflict]." Participants M1 and M5 believed in approaching their organization's leaders. Participant M5 sought his leader for affirmation. Participant M1 kept the leaders informed and involved in the situation at work: "We have a meeting where I invite all the leaders ... I'm giving information ... So, I'll make sure they know."

Theme 2: Navigating Workplace Challenges

In navigating workplace challenges through advocating for oneself, all 14 participants had similar collective experiences. The participants addressed the challenges at the workplace by proving themselves based on their educational qualifications. The participants also practiced code switching. They perceived that they needed to adjust their language, behavior, and appearance to make others comfortable and make themselves

presentable among non-African American individuals. Lastly, the participants spoke up for themselves.

Subtheme 1: Education. All 14 participants believed in the importance of their educational backgrounds to support themselves when facing discrimination and questions about their credentials. Participant M1 expressed his confidence in the knowledge he acquired from school:

By education, I have [an] electrical engineering degree. So, I did design phase ... all this stuff ... I got experience hands on compared to these new guys that they didn't have hands on ... I feel like I have that better edge.

Participant F3 was also confident in her skills gained from school to navigate workplace challenges:

My pursuit in education and how it relates to the position. I actually was a political science major, so I wanted to be a lawyer and a lot of that was speaking engagements, thinking outside of the box, a lot of critical thinking, a lot of analyzing. I think that prepared me only because it made me, again, think outside the box. I'm a little more outspoken. I'm a little bit more headstrong. If I feel a certain way or I'm convinced that my research or my data is accurate, I'm going to push forward with it. I'm not really intimidated by large groups or someone having higher authority.

Subtheme 2: Code Switching. Another strategy in navigating workplace challenges shared by six female participants and three male participants was code switching. According to five female and two male participants, code switching meant adjusting themselves to make their non-Black people more comfortable with their presence.

The participants shared that they adjusted how they talked and looked to appear less aggressive. Participant M6 stated, "Code switching in the sense of speaking differently, absolutely, yes. Everybody's got their 'company man' voice...they're definitely more comfortable, especially in the context of amongst my peers at my company." According to the participants, code switching was not exclusive to the workplace. Participant F4 specified the experience of growing up in a predominantly White suburban community where her practice of code switching was "second nature." Participant F4 stated,

I think I've been code switching all my life because that's not something I wouldn't necessarily say that you're taught, but you just learn to pick up from being around a demographic that doesn't look like you ... White people ... I lived in the suburbs, went to a predominantly White school ... It's like second nature, because you're always deemed as aggressive. You're always deemed as overstepping or speaking out of turn, or just any little thing you really do, it's just you're having an attitude. Transitioning to the workspace, you're already having that in the back end of your mind ... this is not really different from me being in a predominantly White school. The only difference is we're all wearing suits, and we're in a professional setting.

Three male participants added that code switching made them relatable to others. For example, Participant M2 stated, "That's part of the code switching, having to [be] relatable to making people feel comfortable." Thus, four female participants and one male participant shared that code switching meant that they were not being true to themselves. Participant F7 stated, "I needed to say things just to be seen. That, again, felt like I was performing and definitely code switching. It's exhausting, honestly. It's exhausting all day to do that." Only Participant M5 disclosed communicating at work as he did outside of work

and did not practice code switching. Conversely, only Participant F5 was unfamiliar with code switching; after I defined the term, Participant F5 shared that she had no such experiences.

Subtheme 3: Speaking Up for Oneself. Apart from obtaining credentials from school, one male and three female participants advocated for themselves through speaking up. Participant M3 stated, “Don't be afraid to make a bold move when you need to make a bold move. Don't be afraid to speak up and advocate for yourself.” Three female participants also believed in speaking up for themselves but added that when they did speak up, they did so with evidence. For example, Participant F5 shared,

When I do come to you, I'm going to have four or five things and I'm going to have all my documentation. That's how I normally handle the situation. Even when I felt like I got overlooked, I didn't go to our director at the time, but I did say something to, at the time, it was my immediate supervisor. I pointed out some examples.

Theme 3: Experiences of Discrimination in Unfair Standards and Opportunities at the Workplace

All the participants described experiences of unfair standards and opportunities afforded to them as discriminatory. Unfair standards and opportunities were attributed to racial discrimination. The “subtle” discrimination, as described by Participants M2, M3, and M6, was the systemic issue in which African Americans tended to have fewer opportunities for growth and success than their White counterparts. Participant M3 articulated,

We have the same house, we have the same model and everything, but Black family here, White family there. I will say, it's been like that in the job market. I can't think

of an instance where directly my race was a problem, but like I say, I can look at my counterparts and my peers and people I started with and I'm like, "Wait, this guy advanced way faster than I did. He got way more opportunity way sooner than I did." It's a much more subtle thing than pointing out to one particular.

Subtheme 1: Achievements are Overlooked. All seven male participants and six female participants shared that African Americans pursuing career growth tended to be overlooked at the organization and needed to have more achievements than their non-African American counterparts. Participant M2 stated, "Black folks, we always have to do more to get even as much as the White guys." Participant M3 shared, "It's been extremely difficult because I feel like being a Black man, I have to do more in order to be held to the same level of standard as my peers." Participant F1 specified the need to achieve twice as much as her White counterpart. Participant F3 shared that despite achieving twice as much as her colleagues, she was still overlooked:

I think I always have to work harder than everyone else. As an African American and as a woman it's like, oh, you did 33.5 million. Well, we knew you could do it, but that's not fair because the qualification is that you didn't want to overwhelm anyone. I have 33.5 million and still that wasn't enough. Meanwhile, there's people on the team that are struggling with 15 million and they're voicing their opinions. They're saying they need help. I've done all of those things. I've done all those things to see you struggle and then you're asking for help and then you get promoted.

Participant F4 added that the pursuit of promotions was not only more difficult but also took longer. Participant F4 also stated that getting hired could be problematic: "If the hiring manager decides not to hire you based on your race, they can do that and not explain

to you why.” Participant F6 had a similar experience as she entered her field at the lowest possible rank because the hiring managers thought she lacked the credentials for higher positions despite having the required qualifications. Participant F5 also similarly shared,

Like I said at first, a lot of being overlooked in the beginning. Feeling like you weren’t as qualified in the beginning of other people would be looking like that’s who you want. [chuckles] I guess I didn’t meet the criteria, what they were looking for at the particular time, because actually, I had applied to many similar positions about three times before I was actually moved to a management position.

Subtheme 2: Experiences of the Lack of Guidance and Support in Pursuing Career Growth. The second collective experience of discrimination among all seven male and six female participants was the lack of guidance and support in pursuing career growth. The participants similarly experienced a lack of representation in the corporate leadership setting. For example, Participant F3 stated, “There’s not really many African American women on our team in general.”

Three female participants stated that they worked in a male-dominated industry. Thus, female representation was scarce. Due to the low number of Black leaders, the participants shared that they experienced difficulties finding sponsors and mentors. Participant F4 shared, “It was very challenging. I had to learn how to navigate some things on my own.” Participant M2 elaborated,

[Caucasian colleague] over here probably went to—Their parents all went to the same country club. They grew up in the same neighborhood. You don’t have that. Now you’re trying to continue to break down barriers to even get to that point before you even have the conversation of, can you help me? It’s first, how can I even

talk to this person? How can I even resonate with this person? I think that goes into play a lot in these spaces. That's why I think feel like the people in our community, Black and Brown community, they struggle so much.

Subtheme 3: Standards are Different. Four male participants and three female participants also experienced others having low expectations of them because they were African Americans. Participants M3 and M4 stated that others thought they could not lead a team. Participant M3 stated, "Even talking to people ... not much is expected of us as African Americans." Participants F2 and F5 shared that they experienced denials and shocked responses when they told people about their credentials. Participant F4 experienced, "When I go into a space and me being a Black woman, and there's an expectation of, well, I know you can do the job, but I don't know if you can over exceed it."

Subtheme 4: Experiences of Blatant Attacks and Disrespect at the Workplace. "Blatant" racial discrimination was experienced by five female and one male participants from their older colleagues. The female participants disclosed that they experienced being "attacked" by older White, Hispanic, and Black women. Participant F2 stated, "Older Black women also are those that attack younger Black women in the workplace." Participant F5 stated that the younger Caucasian women were more "open" than the older Caucasian women and were not discriminatory at work. Participant F1 shared her experience:

They are usually, to be honest, women, so it's usually Latinx and White women who are in there late 50s, early 60s, who tend to have issues with younger, particularly Black women. Who in their opinion haven't paid their dues. I guess, you know, like you're too young to be where you are professionally. Despite having, you know,

maybe more experience in terms of depth of experience and different things that we've done.

Participant M5 had an encounter with a racist Caucasian leader who was typically in conflict with African American employees:

A Caucasian leader ... There was, like I said, blatant, not treating people with respect, getting into shouting matches with people on the floor and everything ... It came out later that that person was known for being a racist individual. I think that would be one of the experiences that was challenging.

Subtheme 5: Experiences of Being Stereotyped as Aggressive at the Workplace due to Being Black. Three female and two male participants experienced being perceived in the workplace as aggressive. Participant M1 shared that he was perceived as aggressive simply for being Black, while Participant M2 believed that he was perceived as aggressive for being Black and tall. Participant M2 stated, "I'm dark-skinned, six-four, so [I'm perceived as] intimidating." Participant F1 disclosed that because of cultural differences between Black culture and other cultures, she was perceived as an "angry Black woman" if she became too expressive. Participant F1 shared, "I think sometimes when you're too animated or expressive, because there are cultural differences, it's seen in a negative like if I'm really upset about something, it might be perceived as aggressive, or, oh, she's the angry Black woman."

Subtheme 6: Mistakes are Magnified. Three female and one male participant revealed that unfair standards against African Americans included the repercussions of making mistakes. Participants F3 and F7 believed they had to remain mindful of what they

said and how they presented themselves to avoid mistakes. Participant M2 reported that the pursuit of promotions was “attainable yet treacherous” because, despite being promoted to higher positions, he needed to continue proving himself and not make mistakes to continue receiving support from others. Participant F1 shared that the discrimination against her when making mistakes was from a combination of being African American, a woman, and younger than most of her colleagues:

If I give you an incorrect answer, it's going to come back ... It wouldn't be assumed that I made a mistake or be assumed that I didn't know what I was talking about. I think is a function of both being African American, being a woman, and then also my age. So, I work with a lot of people who are older than I am and who may not necessarily think that I know what I'm talking about, so I sort of double, and triple check my work.

Subquestion 1: Male African American Midlevel Managers' Collective Experiences

The first subquestion was on the experiences of the male participants in seeking promotions and maintaining senior leadership positions in Fortune 500 companies. The male participants' experiences of decision making and building relationships differed from the experiences of the female participants. All seven male participants stated their experiences of maintaining professionalism and nonpersonal relationships when discussing navigating their careers. The themes “making career decisions based on considering consequences” and “making career decisions based on inputs of leaders and mentors” are described in the following sections.

Theme 4: Making Career Decisions as a Male African American Midlevel Manager

All seven male participants shared their considerations when they made career-related decisions. The participants considered the pros and cons of their decisions and the consequences of their choices. The participants' perceived consequences were based on rules and regulations guiding their professions. Additionally, the male participants sought the input of their leaders and mentors, whom they looked up to for professional opinions.

Subtheme 1: Consideration for Consequences. All seven male participants shared their experiences of being professional in their approach to decision making and building relationships. In decision making, the seven male participants shared their considerations for the consequences of their decisions. Participant M4 described a “transactional” approach to decision making in which his chosen actions depended on the rewards he would receive:

In terms of decision making, I do keep my heart in it a little bit, but I have to remove that personal feeling for it. I have to make it more of a transactional type of decision. I feel like if it's not my own business, I can't give it my all. I've learned that over the years. I'll give 100% for work during my work hours, but beyond that, it's all personal.

Participants M5, M6, and M7 made decisions by weighing the pros and cons relative to their careers. Participant M6 stated, “Honestly, it's really just-- I'm big on pros and cons. Does the benefit outweigh the risk? If it does, then it's worth pursuing. If it doesn't, then I move on.” Participant M7 shared that having a professional approach to decision making helped him focus on his career goals:

I'd have to say that I just take personal out of it. I think for me, the biggest thing is starting with the expected outcome because if I have the expected outcome, then I can block out all the outside noise, and then I can find a way to get to the end zone to complete the task that I need to.

Participant M1 practiced a professional approach to decision making by following the ethical guidelines. Participant M1 shared,

So, I go through the ethics handbook, you know. So, I go through that, go through the HR, go through the website and see, you know, hey, just read the Q&A and everything like you have any issues with you.

Subtheme 2: Consideration for Inputs of Leaders and Mentors. When considering other people's inputs, the seven male participants typically valued the opinions of leaders and mentors. Participant M2 considered his mentor's input as he believed his mentor had already experienced the obstacles he faced: "I internalize where I'm getting it from, who's telling me it, how they've approached things in the past." Participant M6 similarly stated, "I always leverage their opinion and decision making, especially if I'm struggling with something. I just try to reach out to people who have been there, who I trust their insight." When faced with conflicts, Participant M1 approached the organization's leaders to help him professionally resolve the issues. Participant M1 stated, "I try talking with my manager, the HR ... try to use my resources just to see how I could handle this in a professional way."

Subquestion 2: Female African American Midlevel Managers' Collective

Experiences

The second subquestion was on the collective experiences of the female participants in seeking promotions and maintaining senior leadership positions in Fortune 500 companies. Female African American midlevel managers decided with consideration for their personal and professional inputs. Professionally, they used data and inputs from leaders and colleagues. They considered the impact of their choices on their family. The theme that emerged to answer the second subquestion was “considerations of personal life and professional resources when making decisions as a female African American midlevel manager.”

Theme 5: Making Decisions as a Female African American Midlevel Manager

All seven female participants had shared considerations when making decisions relevant to their pursuit of career growth. The female participants used evidential data and professionals' opinions when making decisions related to their careers. The female participants considered their team members' inputs when making decisions. In addition, the female participants also considered the impacts that their decisions might have on their families.

Subtheme 1: Professional Inputs. Professional inputs involved data as evidence and coworkers' opinions as expert advice. Five participants shared that they used data and evidence to calculate risks when making decisions. Participant F4 shared, “I really just like to do my research about it and see if there's anything that I need to subtract, or anything that I need to really work on or just modify so we can mitigate that risk.” Participants F3 and

F7 shared that they would only take risks when they felt secure by the data supporting their decision. Participant F3 stated,

I'm not going to jump and take huge risks because that's, again, usually something for the account executives to do. I can pull data and advise them, but I really don't take really big risks on their behalf. If it's something that I'm doing, maybe I'm setting up documentation or analyzing information, I may take a risk in saying like, I'm setting up this pivot table to show these things because I think they're really important ... I can always scale it back, but to me it's just to put it out there first. I'll take that risk and put the information out there.

Participants F1, F3, and F7 shared that they adhered to regulations when making decisions. Participant F7 stated, "For me, I'll research, I'll look up standard operating procedures. I'll use all the tools that I have. I'll apply them." Like Participant F7, Participant F3 also did her research, but when information was unavailable, she asked for her colleague's input. Participant F3 shared,

Again, standard operating procedures. Oh, we do have a group chat that's WebEx teams. I'll go in there and ask questions. If I don't know, I will ask questions. I will research our portal for who's in what position and ping them and message them and set up time. If I don't know how to use the system, I will find somebody that does, set up time, ask them to train me, give them specific examples for them to walk me through. I might record it, watch it back. That's how I prepare for when tasks come or arise that I don't know.

Participants F2 and F5 considered their team members' inputs when making decisions that would affect the team but also acknowledged that they were the ones to make the final decisions. Participant F5 stated, "I'm the type who I do listen to people input, but I also realize that I make the final decision. Some inputs can be of value, so I analyze all input." Participants F4 and F6 listened to their team's input for constructive criticism. Participant F4 stated,

I'm always open to constructive criticism. As long as you're doing it in a respectful way, then I'm always open to it. I actually encourage my team to have inputs on decisions that can benefit them as well because it's a unity.

Subtheme 2: Personal Life. However, compared to the male participants, the female participants considered their personal lives when making decisions. In choosing career paths, three participants shared that they considered their parents' backgrounds and their families' expectations. Participant F1 was a child of immigrants, and her parents often told her about valuing education and fulfilling the "American Dream," which was a factor in her pursuit of career advancement. Participant F1 added that her mother became employed at a Fortune 500 company, which was the "model" for her career path. Participant F2's parents were professionals in the business industry, which became a factor in her choice of obtaining a marketing degree. Participants F2 and F5 also pursued career growth, partly because of their families' expectations. Participant F5, who was raised by her grandmother, shared, "I would say that I am my grandmother's wildest dream ... I always wanted to make her proud because of the sacrifices that she made for me."

Another personal factor shared by three female participants was that they wanted to be the representation they did not have for their children and the younger generation.

Participant F5 shared,

I have a 9-year-old daughter, so I'm big on Black girl magic, and I want her to see that you can do anything that you put your mind to as long as you work towards it. If you feel like that you have gotten to a point where you don't feel like you can learn anything from anybody, I always tell her you [are] in the wrong room. You need to go to another room because you need to be in a room where you don't feel like you are superior. You need to be in a room where you feel like that you can learn from somebody.

Summary

This chapter contained the presentation of the data and results of this study. This phenomenological study consisted of 14 midlevel African Americans working at U.S. Fortune 500 companies with a subset of seven men and seven women. The data were collected through one-on-one, semistructured interviews and analyzed thematically. This study was guided by one overarching research question on the collective experiences of corporate midlevel African Americans in seeking promotions and maintaining senior leadership positions in Fortune 500 companies, as well as two subquestions on the collective experiences of male and female participants.

Answers to the overarching research question were that African American midlevel managers collectively experienced struggles in resolving conflicts in navigating their careers and facing discrimination, whether racial, gender, or age while pursuing career growth. For the first subquestion, the collective experiences among male participants were that they

tended to have a professional approach when making decisions. For the second subquestion, female participants tended to consider the personal and professional aspects of their lives when making decisions. The results are interpreted and discussed in the next chapter through the lens of the intersectionality theory. The conclusions of the study are also presented in the next chapter.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Within this study, I examined the collective experiences of midlevel African Americans regarding seeking promotions and maintaining corporate leadership roles in Fortune 500 companies in the United States. In addition, the collective experiences of male and female African Americans are discussed. The central phenomenon investigated in this study was the experiences of corporate midlevel African Americans in seeking and maintaining senior leadership positions in Fortune 500 companies, specifically focusing on the difficulties experienced by corporate midlevel African Americans in Fortune 500 companies. The focus was on the collective experience of the difficulties faced by corporate midlevel African Americans in Fortune 500 companies, in line with the communal nature of African American culture (Selvanathan et al., 2023). The intersection of race and gender inherent in the potential gendered differences in participants' experiences was explored through the theory of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 2017).

The theory of applied critical leadership (Santamaria et al., 2022) was applied as one of the theoretical pillars of this study, along with the theory of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1986). Although there were other studies of racial issues in corporate leadership, I aimed to address a threefold gap. Firstly, I examined the experiences of African American midlevel managers from a human resources management perspective, a need identified by Santamaria et al. (2022). I focused on gaining a deeper understanding of the African American middle managers' experiences in seeking promotion and maintaining leadership roles, The need for further research into strategies that are perceived as viable for gaining promotion (Smith et al., 2019) was addressed by this study, and also the research

gap in terms of examining the complex pressures and factors shaping minority employees' career choices (Dickens et al., 2019).

In this chapter, the focus is on the interpretations of the findings, the limitations and implications of the study, and recommendations for future research, followed by the study's conclusion. In addition, the implications for social change are explored through the themes that have emerged from the participants' lived experiences. Each theme is discussed concerning the existing literature and the gaps in the literature that have been identified.

Responses to the overarching research question on the collective experiences of corporate midlevel African Americans in seeking promotions and maintaining senior leadership positions in Fortune 500 companies showed that African American midlevel managers collectively experienced struggles in resolving conflicts in navigating their careers, as well as challenges in facing discrimination while pursuing career growth, whether due to their race, gender, or age. The first subquestion was used to address the collective experiences among male participants, and it was found that they tended to approach decision-making professionally. The responses concerning the second subquestion showed that female participants tended to consider the personal and professional aspects of their lives when making decisions. These results will be interpreted and discussed in the next section.

Interpretation of the Findings

The interpretation of the results in this section is organized according to the research questions to represent the collective experiences of corporate midlevel African Americans in seeking and maintaining senior leadership positions in Fortune 500 companies. The research question, subquestions, and relevant themes are examined

according to the data from the participants' responses. The emerging themes are grouped in how they relate to each element of the research question and subquestions. The themes are examined regarding how they extend knowledge gained in the literature review and confirm or contradict the literature discussed in Chapter 2.

Overarching Research Question: Midlevel African American Managers' Collective Experiences

The literature has shown that African Americans are underrepresented in corporate leadership (Randel et al., 2021) and that other minority groups have advanced at a greater rate (Alan et al., 2020). Regarding Fortune 500 companies, there have only been 19 Black CEOs since 1955 (Fortune, 2021), with only four African American men currently in leadership positions (Posner, 2020; Sahadi, 2020) and one African American woman (Loeb, 2021). Therefore, it can be assumed that the participants in this study come from a small pool of African Americans in corporate management.

Wingfield and Chavez (2020) posited that the nature and type of discrimination are influenced by an organization's structure and the Black employee's position within the hierarchy. In this study, all 14 participants shared experiences of being discriminated against in the workplace and noted that the discrimination could be based on race, gender, or age. This finding supports the perspective of intersectionality, which states that distinct but overlapping barriers that influence discrimination and disadvantages result from society's perspectives of an individual based on gender, race, or class (Crenshaw, 2017). The multipronged nature of the discrimination experienced by individuals can also be seen in the group's collective experience. Intersectionality offers a multipronged axis to consider

individual identity (Morales, 2019). It can increase understanding of the intersectional structures of oppression within these corporate environments (Duran & Jones, 2020).

On the other hand, critical leadership theory focuses on increasing understanding of diverse leadership perspectives. Although applied critical leadership was developed to address the experiences of diverse female leaders (Santamaría et al., 2022), the theory shows numerous axes of diverse leadership, such as race, ethnicity, and migrant status, that can be applied to diverse leadership, as in this study. Two key factors are essential in interpreting the responses from the 14 participants regarding their experiences in seeking promotions and maintaining senior leadership positions in Fortune 500 companies. These involved the collective experience of workplace discrimination and the challenges encountered in navigating the workplace. Both subsets of male and female participants reported how they navigated the struggles through seeking support, building relationships, advocating for themselves, and explaining code-switching. Seven themes emerged from the participants' experiences of navigating workplace challenges and discrimination. The themes aligned to the findings in Chapter 4 are described in the following sections: (a) Theme 1, seeking support, divided into two subthemes; (b) Theme 2, navigating workplace challenges, divided into three subthemes; (c) and Theme 3, experiences of discrimination, divided into six subthemes. Themes 4 and 5 are aligned to the two subresearch questions: (a) Male African American midlevel managers' experiences, with two subthemes, and (b) Female African American midlevel managers' collective experiences, with two subthemes under Theme 5.

Theme 1: Seeking Support

All male and female participants perceived the importance of seeking support when navigating workplace challenges, although men and women reported that they experienced this slightly differently. All seven female participants sought support through building internal and external professional networks, while the four male participants sought support through approaching leaders and mentors who could advocate for them. This exposure to resources that support African Americans in their leadership journey was a common theme in the literature, with the importance of both formal and informal mentorship stressed by several scholars (Greene, 2019; Roberts et al., 2019; Skeffrey, 2023). Participants in these studies indicated that mentorship helped them obtain their positions and strive for excellence at work (Greene, 2019; Skeffrey, 2023).

Subtheme One. Internal and External Support Sought by Female African American Midlevel Managers. In this study, four female participants stated that they had internal solid support within the organization; remarkably, they had the support of a seasoned Black woman, with two participants specifying particular individuals. This finding aligns with the views of Roberts and May (2019), who indicated that the most effective mentorships were informal relationships that naturally developed within the work groups. Nonetheless, three participants did not specify whether they had strong organizational support. However, they stated they had a good professional relationship with colleagues and were respected and acknowledged for their contributions. Therefore, they could still offer opinions candidly and safely discuss issues with these professional contacts, similar to the support provided by mentor/mentee relationships (Creary, 2020; Greene, 2019).

In a study by Skeffrey (2023), Black women stressed that intentionality and resilience were needed to achieve executive-level roles. The participants in this study perceived a need for being proactive in seeking support and displaying persistence in a predominantly White system (Shah et al., 2022). Two female participants indicated that they built their external network for support, thereby diversifying their available support.

Subtheme Two. Leaders and Mentors Sought by Male African American Midlevel Managers. Male participants sought support by directly approaching people they thought could advocate for them. Four male participants perceived that such people were leaders in the organization, the industry, and their teammates. Participant M2 believed in actively seeking a mentor and seeking sponsorship, stressing the importance of having someone advocating for him even when he was not present. He also stressed the importance of actively seeking out the right people to support him in seeking a more senior leadership position. Participants M1 and M5 also believed in approaching their organization's leaders directly for affirmation and to keep the flow of information. As reported by Roberts et al. (2019), Black Harvard MBAs who had reached top management positions confirmed the importance of mentorship. Boatner et al. (2021) endorsed formal mentorship programs as a way for corporate managers to build personal relationships with influential leaders.

Two participants also stressed the importance of human resources personnel in seeking support, mainly when conflicts arise. Participant M2 also believed in involving the human resources (HR) personnel when conflicts arise to seek support in addressing the issue. This finding links back to one of the theoretical pillars of this study, namely applied critical leadership theory. Santamaria et al. (2022) identified core characteristics of applied critical leaders related to human resources practice, and of these, initiating critical

courageous conversations, even when difficult, and building trust are relevant to these responses by participants.

The paucity of visible African American leaders in corporate America and their limited visibility at Fortune 500 companies (Kelley, 2019) have contributed to the lack of leadership self-efficacy in aspiring Black leaders. This visible Black leadership shortage negatively impacted their internal valence (Coqual, 2019; Kelley, 2019). Black leaders should be visible in organizations, and Santamaria et al. (2022) indicated that critical leaders should enact leadership within their organizations. When diversity is perceived as unimportant to corporate leadership, fewer minority candidates apply for senior leadership positions (Flory et al., 2021). Although research has indicated that few African American professionals believed that someone of their race could achieve top positions at the company they work for (Coqual, 2019), the responses in this study are encouraging as they show that the participants have recognized that they must actively seek the support they need to advance in their careers.

Theme 2: Navigating Workplace Challenges

All 14 participants had similar collective experiences in navigating workplace challenges through advocating for oneself. The participants stressed the importance of proving themselves based on their educational qualifications when confronting challenges in the workplace. However, previous studies have shown that implications that Black employees are token hires diminish the qualifications of Black leaders who have earned promotions (Creary, 2020), and this may lead to code-switching among Black leaders who want to conform to organizational expectations that they assimilate into a predominantly White culture (Adejumo, 2021). The participants in this study indicated that they practiced

code-switching and perceived that they needed to adjust their language, behavior, and appearance to make others comfortable and to make themselves presentable among non-African American individuals. Lastly, the participants spoke up for themselves.

Subtheme One. Education. When their credentials were questioned or faced with discrimination, all 14 participants believed in the importance of their educational background to support themselves. Their qualifications and knowledge gave them confidence in their competence to face challenges, as expressed by Participant M1: “I got experience hands-on compared to these new guys that they didn't have hands-on ... I feel like I have that better edge.” This confidence in drawing on skills gained from school to navigate the workplace was echoed by Participant F3:

I think that prepared me only because it made me, again, think outside the box. I'm a little more outspoken. I'm a little bit more headstrong. If I feel a certain way or I'm convinced that my research or my data is accurate, I'm going to push forward with it. I'm not really intimidated by large groups or someone having higher authority.

The literature has shown that African American female executives of Fortune 500 companies view advanced degrees as necessary for career advancement (Greene, 2019). Several scholars have, however, cited the completion rate at higher institutions as an indication that it is more difficult for African Americans to obtain higher degrees (Carmichael et al., 2006; Lareau, 2015; Wingfield & Chavez, 2020), and African Americans were the less likely to graduate (Banks & Dohy, 2019).

Subtheme Two. Code-Switching. One reason African Americans might not seek or desire corporate leadership positions in the United States is pressure to assimilate into the dominant White culture (Feldman, 2019). According to Shah et al. (2022), African

American leaders who ascend the hierarchy of the workplace perceive exponentially greater pressure to engage in racial code-switching to assimilate into a predominantly White culture. Also known as identity shifting, racial codeswitching can be either conscious or unconscious. It involves Black people adjusting their behaviors and self-presentation to avoid stereotyping and obtain desired outcomes such as promotion (Dickens et al., 2019; McCluney et al., 2021).

According to five female and two male participants, code-switching meant adjusting themselves to make their non-Black coworkers more comfortable with their presence. Participant M2 stated, "That's part of the code-switching, having to [be] relatable to making people feel comfortable." The literature has found that cultural differences may negatively impact the trajectory of African Americans' careers (Jones, 2020; Mbilishaka et al., 2020; McCluney et al., 2021). For example, Black women who wear their hair naturally have been penalized for violating professional norms (Jones, 2020; Mbilishaka et al., 2020).

In line with the research by McCluney et al. (2021), who found that African Americans whose voices were distinctly recognizable as Black were perceived as less competent and received lower wages in comparison to similarly educated Black employees whose speech mirrored standard American English, Participant M6 stated, "Code-switching in the sense of speaking differently, absolutely yes. Everybody's got their 'company man' voice."

Three male participants added that code-switching made them relatable to others, endorsed by others who indicated that they adjusted the way they talked and looked to appear less aggressive. According to the participants, code-switching was not exclusive to the workplace. Participant F4 specified the experience of growing up in a predominantly

White suburban community where her practice of code-switching was “like second nature, because you’re always deemed as aggressive. You’re always deemed as overstepping or speaking out of turn, or just any little thing you really do, it’s just you’re having an attitude.” Four female participants and one male participant shared that code-switching meant they were not being true to themselves, with Participant F7 perceiving this as particularly exhausting. Of the fourteen participants, only participant M5 disclosed communicating at work as he did outside of work and did not practice code-switching, while only participant F5 was unfamiliar with the term code-switching, and after I defined the term, participant F5 shared that she had no such experiences.

Subtheme Three. Speaking Up for Oneself. Apart from obtaining credentials from school, one male and three female participants also advocated for themselves by speaking up. However, they did so with solid evidence of being right, as Participant F5 shared,

When I do come to you, I'm going to have four or five things and I'm going to have all my documentation. That's how I normally handle the situation. Even when I felt like I got overlooked, I didn't go to our director at the time, but I did say something to, at the time, it was my immediate supervisor. I pointed out some examples. Shah et al. (2022) supported the notion of Black executives speaking out and described needing a "stubborn persistence" (para. 32) when advocating for yourself within a predominantly White system.

Theme 3: Experiences of Discrimination in Unfair Standards and Opportunities at the Workplace

Discrimination can be implicit, as systemic racism serves to perpetuate racial disparity even when no parties involved engage in explicit racism (McCluney et al., 2021). Microinvalidations are frequent occurrences, such as when the thoughts or experiences of minority group members are invalidated (Fattoracci et al., 2020; Salmon, 2020). One example is referring to Black workers as a "diversity hire," which negates their qualifications and reduces the worth of African Americans within the organization (Creary, 2020; Shah et al., 2020). All of the participants described experiences of unfair standards and opportunities afforded to them as discriminatory, and they attributed these unequal opportunities and standards to racial discrimination. The "subtle" discrimination, as described by participants M2, M3, and M6, was the systemic issue in which African Americans tended to have fewer opportunities for growth and success than their White counterparts, with Participant M3 articulating, "It's a much more subtle thing than pointing out to one particular."

Subtheme One. Achievements are Overlooked. Microinvalidations, where the validity of the thoughts or experiences of minority groups are consistently questioned, occur in all organizations and across genders (Fattoracci et al., 2020; Salmon, 2020). According to Salmon (2020), particularly Black women working in predominantly White organizations are frequently subject to microinvalidations (Salmon, 2020). The literature describes Black women being ignored, having their work discounted, being talked over by colleagues, and having their authority questioned (Jordan-Zachery, 2019; Salmon, 2020). These multiple levels of discrimination against Black female leaders (race and gender, in this case)

emphasize the intersecting structures of oppression and discrimination as posited by Duran and Jones (2020). Black experiences in corporate America are also overlooked and underestimated by colleagues, with their intelligence underestimated, as reported by He et al. (2019) and Coqual (2019)

All seven male participants and six female participants shared that in their pursuit of career advancement as African Americans, they were often overlooked at the organization and that they needed to have more achievements than their non-African American counterparts, with Participant F3 stating that even after having achieved twice as much as her colleagues, she was still overlooked. This perception was endorsed by Participant F4, who added that the pursuit of promotions was not only more difficult but also took longer. Participant F5 and Participant F6 had similar experiences of entering the workplace at a lower rank because they were regarded as lacking the required credentials despite being suitably qualified. These responses confirm the findings by Salmon (2020) concerning the microinvalidation of Black women in the workplace but also expand on the notion with more nuance about Black women's career trajectories.

Subtheme Two. Experiences of the Lack of Guidance and Support in Pursuing Career Growth. The collective experience of seven male and six female participants was the lack of guidance and support in pursuing career growth. There was also an experience of a lack of representation in the corporate leadership setting, as indicated in the previous literature (Kelley, 2019). Participant F3 stated, "There's not really many African American women on our team in general." Three female participants stated that they worked in a male-dominated industry and lacked female representation, making it difficult for all the participants to find sponsors and mentors. Participant F4 shared, "It was

very challenging. I had to learn how to navigate some things on my own.” Participant M2 expanded on this, indicating how the previous cultural experiences of their Caucasian colleagues assisted them in creating a network of support in the corporate environment.

Subtheme Three. Standards are Different. Four male participants and three female participants also experienced others having low expectations of them because they are African Americans, with two male participants perceiving that other people thought they were not capable of leading a team. Participant M3 stated, “Even talking to people...not much is expected of us as African Americans.” Participants F2 and F5 shared that they experienced denials and shocked responses when they told people about their credentials. These experiences align with the findings of Morgan (2020), who found that although many Black women aspire to leadership, they encounter challenges due to being held to a higher standard than their colleagues and presumed to be less qualified despite their credentials.

Prior research suggests that people of color are promoted at slower rates than their White colleagues in predominantly White organizations (Small, 2020). Since most Fortune 500 companies favor internal candidates for CEO roles (Sanders, 2011), the lack of recognition for people of color within the organization, including the invalidation of the achievements of Black candidates, is of particular concern. Even when Black executives are promoted to key positions, companies sometimes have to contend with negative reactions from investors despite Black leaders being better qualified than their White counterparts (Gligor et al., 2021; Jeong et al., 2021).

Subtheme Four. Experiences of Blatant Attacks and Disrespect at the Workplace. Five women and one man shared experiences of blatant racial discrimination, and these experiences were from older colleagues. Female participants disclosed that they

experienced being “attacked” by older White, Hispanic, and Black women, and Participant F5 stated that the younger Caucasian women were more “open” than the older Caucasian women and were not discriminatory at work. Participant F1 shared that the main aggressors were women, “usually Latinx and White women who are in there late 50s, early 60s, who tend to have issues with younger, particularly Black women.” She related this issue to the perception that they had not paid their dues and did not deserve to be in their position at their age. This finding relates to the microinvalidations mentioned by Salmon (2020).

In terms of the male participants, Participant M5 had an encounter with a racist Caucasian leader who was typically in conflict with African American employees. Participant M5 shared: “There was, like I said, blatant, not treating people with respect, getting into shouting matches with people on the floor and everything ... It came out later that that person was known for being a racist individual.” These blatant aggressions, coupled with microaggressions that devalue people of color and signal that they are undesirably different (Corbin et al., 2018; Fattoracci et al., 2020; Small, 2020) can impede the career advancement of African Americans in the workforce (Skeffrey, 2023).

The blatant discrimination is supported by the literature on workplace bullying and its negative effects (Anasori et al., 2019; Jordan-Zachery, 2019; Pyke, 2018). Workplace bullying has been found to predict absence, job turnover, unemployment, suicidal ideation (Høgh et al., 2021), and emotional exhaustion (Anasori et al., 2019). Research has also indicated the effects of workplace bullying targeting minorities (Hollis, 2018; Jordan-Zachery, 2019; Meriläinen et al., 2019; MinibasPoussard et al., 2018). The career progression of African Americans is negatively affected by workplace bullying (Hollis, 2018;

Jordan-Zachery, 2019; McKinney et al., 2021; Meriläinen et al., 2019; MinibasPoussard et al., 2018; Pyke, 2018).

Subtheme Five. Experiences of Being Stereotyped as Aggressive at the Workplace Due to Being Black. Stereotyping as a form of discrimination has been discussed in previous literature (Greene, 2019; Livingston & Rosett, 2020; Xiao, 2022). Stereotypes permeate the workplace, and these labels define certain individuals as unsuitable for high-ranking leadership positions (He et al., 2019; Greene, 2019). Three female and two male participants experienced being perceived in the workplace as aggressive. Participant M1 shared that he was perceived as aggressive simply for being Black, while Participant M2 believed that he was perceived as aggressive for being Black and tall. Participant F1 disclosed that due to cultural differences between Black culture and other cultures, she was perceived to be an “angry Black woman” if she became too expressive.

Subtheme Six. Mistakes are Magnified. Three female and one male participant revealed that unfair standards against African Americans included the repercussions of making mistakes, with two participants believing that they had to be mindful of what they say and how they present themselves to avoid mistakes. Participant M2 reported that it was dangerous to pursue a promotion, as despite being promoted to higher positions, the pressure to prove himself was still there. Participant F1 shared that the discrimination against her when making mistakes was a result of a combination of being African American, being a woman, and being younger than most of her colleagues, which supports the intersectional nature of discrimination against Black women (Crenshaw, 1989; Morales, 2019). These invalidations reported by the participants also constitute environmental

microaggressions, where women and ethnic minorities are alienated from recognition in the community (Fattoracci et al., 2020). This constant discrimination, even in small dismissive acts, harms the well-being and resilience of the victim (Rimmer, 2020), negatively impacts workplace environments, psyche, and productivity of minorities (Small, 2020), and influences the cognitive, emotional, and physical functioning of minorities (McKinney et al., 2021). In addition, microaggressions that result in emotional fatigue may negatively impact the profitability of organizations (Farmanesh et al., 2020).

Subresearch Question 1: Male African American Midlevel Managers' Collective Experiences

From the responses, it is clear that the experiences of the male participants in seeking promotions and maintaining senior leadership positions in Fortune 500 companies differed for male and female participants. All seven male participants stated their experiences of maintaining professionalism and impersonal relationships when discussing navigating their careers. The themes “making career decisions based on considering consequences” and “making career decisions based on inputs of leaders and mentors” are also described.

Theme 4: Making Career Decisions as a Male African American Midlevel Manager

All seven male participants shared their considerations when they made career-related decisions. The participants considered the pros and cons of their decisions and the consequences of their choices. The participants' perceived consequences were based on rules and regulations guiding their profession, and they sought the guidance of their leaders and mentors whom they look up to for professional opinions.

Subtheme One: Consideration for Consequences. All seven male participants shared their experiences of being professional in their approach to decision making and building relationships and how they considered the consequences of their decisions when making those decisions. Participant M4 described a “transactional” approach to decision-making in which his chosen actions were dependent on the rewards he would receive. In contrast, others noted that they made decisions by weighing the pros and cons relative to their careers.

Subtheme Two: Consideration for Inputs of Leaders and Mentors. When considering other people’s inputs, the seven male participants typically valued the opinions of leaders and mentors, noting that they believed their mentors already experienced the challenges they faced and trusted their insight. When faced with conflicts, participant M1 approached the organization’s leaders to help him resolve the issues professionally, stating that he tried to talk with managers and HR and use the resources available to him to handle the issue professionally. This interaction between leadership and middle management that the participants strive for is supported in the literature by Santamaria et al. (2022), who indicated that one facet of applied critical leadership was that leaders had to enact a model of leadership that gave back to marginalized workers. Maintaining a focus on social justice by bringing awareness to racial inequalities and advocating for diversity in senior positions is another way that Black executives can cope with challenges in career advancement (Greene, 2019). Networking relationships can also combat feelings of isolation (Shah et al., 2022).

Subresearch Question 2: Female African American Midlevel Managers' Collective Experiences

In discussing the theory of intersectionality, Crenshaw (1989) concluded that Black women may experience discrimination in several ways that are not necessarily unidirectional but that Black women have devised mechanisms to overcome the challenges associated with gender and racial discrimination. One of these mechanisms is developing a tolerance to opposition in a male-dominated work environment (Morgan, 2020). In examining the collective experiences of the female participants in seeking promotions and maintaining senior leadership positions in Fortune 500 companies, it was found that female African American midlevel managers decided with consideration for their personal and professional inputs. Professionally, they utilized data and inputs from leaders and colleagues, similar to the male participants. They considered the impacts of their choices on their family. The theme that emerged to answer the second subquestion was “considerations of personal life and professional resources when making decisions as a female African American midlevel manager.

Theme 5: Making Decisions as a Female African American Midlevel Manager

All seven female participants had shared considerations when making decisions relevant to their pursuit of career growth and noted that they used evidential data and professionals' opinions when making decisions related to their careers. Female participants shared that they considered their team members' inputs when making decisions and typically considered the impacts their decisions might have on their families.

Subtheme One: Professional Inputs. Professional inputs typically involved data as evidence and coworkers' opinions as expert advice, with five participants sharing that

they utilized data and evidence to take calculated risks when making decisions. Participants F1, F3, and F7 shared that they adhered to regulations when making decisions, with Participant F3 noting that when information was unavailable, she asked for her colleague's input. Participants F2 and F5 shared that they considered their team members' inputs when making decisions that would affect the team but also acknowledged that they were the ones to make the final decision. However, Participants F4 and F6 stressed that they listened to their team's inputs for constructive criticism. Again, this way of working emphasizes the communal nature of African American culture and the importance of focusing on collective experience (Selvanathan et al., 2023).

Subtheme Two: Personal Life. In contrast to the male participants, the female participants typically considered their personal lives when making decisions. Three participants shared that when choosing a career path, they considered their parents' background and their family's expectations. Participant F1 is a child of immigrants, and her parents often told her about valuing education and fulfill the "American Dream," which was a factor in her pursuit of career advancement. Participant F1 added that her mother became employed at a Fortune 500 company, which was the "model" for her career path. Participant F2's parents were professionals in the business industry, which became a factor in her choice of obtaining a marketing degree. Participants F2 and F5 pursued career advancement partly due to family expectations and shared that they wanted to make their families proud. Another personal factor shared by three female participants was that they wanted to be the representation they did not have for their children and the younger generation. This finding relates to the proposal of Santamaria et al. (2022), who indicated the importance of modeling Black leadership for future generations.

The experiences of the Black female participants in this study also echo the findings of Martinez et al. (2022) regarding applied critical leadership among Latina assistant principals. These participants noted that they were inspired by their parents and upbringing, ongoing support and mentorship, overcoming discrimination and microaggressions, and becoming change advocates. These factors defined their leadership journeys (Martinez et al., 2022). This finding aligns with Cawley (2020), who applied critical research theory to provide a perspective on Canadian postsecondary leaders and found that the participants' roles and values supported social justice and educational equity.

Limitations of the Study

The first limitation of this study is that it relies on self-reported data, as is usual in qualitative research, which is subjective (Moen & Middelthon, 2015). Because this data cannot be externally validated, it must be taken in good faith. In this study, the participants felt free to speak openly and honestly in a safe and confidential environment; this limitation is somewhat mitigated. Another limitation is self-selection bias. Following research ethics (Balnaves & Caputi, 2001), participation in the study must be voluntary. However, this creates the possibility that those who express interest and ultimately participate in the study will be in some way materially different from those who do not. From the interpretation of the findings, it is clear that the sample in this study was not skewed, as it consisted of a diverse sample of fourteen individuals. My biases may also limit the study. As a scholar interested in the research topic, I inevitably have expectations, preconceptions, and biases regarding the topic. I continuously reflected and revisited assumptions and perceptions in the research process, which mitigated this limitation.

I focused on only African Americans employed in middle management to understand better their lived experiences regarding seeking and maintaining promotion in Fortune 500 companies. Fortune 500 companies are often treated as a representative index of the corporate world, representing a relevant context for African Americans to study barriers to senior management-level equity. However, African Americans in middle management in organizations other than Fortune 500 companies could have different experiences. This limitation could be addressed through further research, as outlined below.

The focus on corporate midlevel African Americans seeking and maintaining senior leadership positions is motivated by the assumption that these leaders already have a stake in the corporate world and represent a population of future leaders. This assumption does not imply that these are the only individuals who could be approached for responses on their experiences in this regard. Furthermore, in this study, some gender-based differentiation was achieved in formulating questions and resultant themes. However, an extensive analysis of the differences between the experiences of male and female executives was not conducted.

Recommendations

This study was delineated in response to calls for additional research from primarily three sources: Santamaría et al. (2022) called for research on racial issues in leadership from a human resources management perspective, Smith et al. (2019) called for further research into the strategies that African Americans perceive as viable for gaining attention and promotion, as well as the benefits and drawbacks of using such strategies, and Dickens et al. (2019) called for additional research on the pressures and factors that shape African Americans' career choices.

From the literature review, it has emerged that some African Americans have overcome existing barriers and attained elite positions within Fortune 500 companies. These individuals benefitted from resilience (Skeffrey, 2023; Small, 2020), a motivation to lead (Badura et al., 2020), higher education (Greene, 2019), and exposure to resources and mentors (Greene, 2019; Skeffrey, 2023). Further research focusing on the applied critical leadership perspective employed in this study (Santamaría et al., 2022) may focus on each beneficial factor separately to determine the role played by each in overcoming the barriers faced by African American executives in senior management positions. Such a study may address the research gap identified by Smith et al. (2019).

Furthermore, future research focusing on an HR management perspective (Santamaría et al., 2022) could address perceptions of challenges in African American leadership. These include unequal pay (Alan et al., 2020), adverse investor reactions (Gligor et al., 2021), tokenization (Dickens et al., 2019), and racial battle fatigue (Hollis, 2018; Shah et al., 2022). Further studies could also focus on strategies that HR managers could use to support African American leaders to cope with the cumulative effects of discrimination in the workplace and increase diversity and social justice (Greene, 2019), supportive relationships (Shah et al., 2022), and positive, self-affirming labels (Skeffrey, 2023).

By examining the lived experiences of African American middle management regarding seeking promotion and maintaining leadership positions, this study has addressed the research gap to some extent. The focus specifically on corporate midlevel African Americans seeking and maintaining senior leadership positions could be expanded in future research to include corporate African Americans seeking and maintaining leadership positions at other levels of the corporate structure. The research could also be

expanded to a similar qualitative study of young African American executives who have recently entered the corporate world to determine where the support structures are for them in seeking more senior corporate leadership positions. This study may provide further expansion and nuance on the theme of “seeking support” in this study.

This research focused only on individuals employed in Fortune 500 companies across the United States. A similar qualitative study could be performed on the barriers to senior management-level equity for African Americans in other companies across the United States to build on the findings of this study. There may be different experiences, and the motivation, pressures, and experiences of midlevel African Executives could be different.

One of the aims of this study was to investigate the experiences of male and female corporate African American midlevel managers. Some reported experiences were different between male and female executives; men and women were also impacted differently by the intersectional nature of their positions and how they were perceived. Regarding future research, more defined articulations of intersectionality theory can be investigated by considering more gendered perspectives (Crenshaw, 2017) because male and female African Americans may have collective experiences that differ in key aspects.

Theoretical Contribution

The qualitative research design in this study has enabled me to explore the central research phenomenon in a way that enhances a full understanding of the issues under study from a holistic standpoint (Moen & Middelthon, 2015). The research was focused on collecting open-ended, descriptive data from the participants regarding their opinions, perceptions, and experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). This study resulted in more

nuanced and specific descriptions of the participants' experiences than what could have been obtained through quantitative research.

In terms of theoretical implications, this study has addressed a research gap established through a review of the existing literature, primarily focusing on three sources that called for additional research. These were around the theory of applied critical leadership, where Santamaría et al. (2022) noted a need for more research into racial issues in leadership from a human resources management perspective. I fulfill this identified gap in the literature by examining the experiences of African American corporate leaders in Fortune 500 companies from a human resources management perspective (e.g., Santamaría et al., 2022). Secondly, research was needed regarding strategies African Americans perceive as viable for gaining attention and promotion (Smith et al., 2019). In terms of the practices African Americans perceive as viable for seeking promotion and maintaining their senior leadership positions (Smith et al., 2019), the study has shown how African American midlevel managers navigate the barriers and challenges in achieving this objective. I provided a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of African American middle management regarding seeking promotion and maintaining leadership positions. Dickens et al. (2019) indicated a need for additional research regarding complex pressures and factors that shape minority employees' career choices. The participants' responses in this study provided an intimate perspective on how they perceived the factors that shape their choices when planning their career paths and how they will navigate the challenges to achieve their goals. In addition to addressing these three areas where previous researchers perceived gaps, I considered gendered perspectives aligned with intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 2017). Male and female African Americans were found to have different collective

experiences, as detailed in intersectionality theory, and these different views enriched the theoretical perspective of the study.

Positive Social Change

The inequality and discrimination at managerial levels of Fortune 500 companies represent a social problem and are likely indicative of ongoing systemic racism (Randel et al., 2021). In examining the experiences of discrimination among leadership at Fortune 500 companies, this study has helped to understand the difficulties that arise in reaching senior management positions. Researchers and corporate leaders to identify the issues inhibiting equitable representation of African Americans in the senior management of Fortune 500 companies. The lived experiences of these managers can inform the decisions of policymakers and organizational leaders in systematically targeting these issues, thereby leading to positive social change.

For individual African American managers working in companies in the United States, this study may guide them on how to confront the challenges inherent in the ongoing prevalence of racism within organizational systems built on White hegemony, including in Fortune 500 companies (Adejumo, 2021). Individual African American executives still face several barriers that impede their efforts to rise to senior-level positions and executive roles within Fortune 500 companies. Because this study is based on first-hand accounts of lived experience, others in similar positions could resonate and find helpful advice. The present study may also help contribute to positive social change by empowering those facing similar challenges.

As shown in the literature, participants in this study also reported that they had to work harder than their White colleagues to advance in their organization (Adejumo, 2021;

Creary, 2020). This cut across both genders, whereas male African American leaders emphasized internal motivation to lead (Chan & Drasgow, 2001) and the reliance on mentors and advocates inside and outside the institution. This study may enrich the understanding of how African American managers in Fortune 500 companies can navigate their career path by motivating, applying more effort, and spending more time to achieve and maintain leadership roles and responsibilities (Badura et al., 2020). Male participants also believed in approaching potential mentors and the organization's leaders directly, underscoring the importance of mentors for minority corporate executives (Greene, 2019; Skeffrey, 2023). Female participants found mentorship and support inside and outside the organization in informal mentorship. Top management may find encouragement from this study to institute formal mentorship programs for African American midlevel managers (Boatner et al., 2021) and support and strengthen organizations outside of the corporate structures that provide role models and mentors to African American corporate managers.

In examining the collective experiences of the female participants in seeking promotions and maintaining senior leadership positions in Fortune 500 companies, this study has made an important contribution to refining research in this area from the perspective of gender. I took a unique gendered perspective on the research question through the application of intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1989), and thereby addressed the unique barriers faced by African American women face in achieving executive-level positions in the workplace (Pyke, 2018; Sales et al., 2019; Smith et al., 2019). The research addressed experiences of microinvalidation reported by Black female leaders in the form of work being undervalued, educational achievements being undervalued, and their intelligence being underestimated, experiences that occur in predominantly White-

dominated organizations (Jordan-Zachery, 2019; Salmon, 2022). By focusing on multiple levels of discrimination against Black female leaders (race and gender, in this case), this study could give a fresh perspective on the intersecting structures of oppression and discrimination faced by Black female executives (Duran & Jones, 2020). Corporate management could take this up, and interventions explicitly targeted at improving the experiences of African American female corporate managers could be designed.

A standalone study cannot create change, but the results can assist HR managers and corporate leaders identify the specific problems that need addressing to create positive social change moving forward. By creating an understanding of the difficulties faced by African Americans in reaching and sustaining senior management positions, this study can assist future researchers and corporate leaders in identifying the specific issues that are inhibiting equitable representation of African Americans in the senior management of Fortune 500 companies. Once identified, policymakers and organizational leaders can target these issues more deliberately, thereby leading to positive social change.

Implications for Practice

This study has provided information on the difficulties faced by midlevel corporate African Americans employed at Fortune 500 companies; companies may use this information to improve their equity practices and advocate for diversity at the management level. The underrepresentation of African Americans in the leadership of Fortune 500 companies not only speaks to ethics and social justice but also has financial implications for firms and shareholders (DuBrin, 2022; Gomez & Bernet, 2019). Corporate management could use the knowledge gained in this research to ensure greater organizational diversity.

Maintaining a focus on social justice by bringing awareness to racial inequalities and advocating for diversity in senior positions is another way that Black executives can cope with challenges in career advancement (Greene, 2019). This study may help mitigate perceptions that may cause some African Americans to forego seeking and maintaining corporate leadership roles. These include conflicting expectations from followers (McClerking & Block, 2020) or conflicting concepts of leadership style relative to the prevailing organizational culture (Feldman, 2019).

In addition, this study could illuminate other perceived challenges to seeking and maintaining corporate leadership roles, such as perceiving that they would experience more discrimination, conflicting expectations, or tokenism, which could be addressed by HR management. Understanding the strategies used by African Americans who have sought promotion and maintained leadership roles will assist in creating targeted interventions to both mitigate possible barriers and bolster the promotion of African Americans to corporate leadership roles. Furthermore, as I focused on the collective experience of African American leaders in midlevel corporate management, I also addressed the collective nature of African American culture (e.g., Selvanathan et al., 2023). This process enabled a genuine engagement with their circumstances and enabled me to obtain results that would be more relevant and applicable in practice.

Corporations should also actively support initiatives to increase the number of Black corporate executives within Fortune 500 companies, such as the Executive Leadership Council (ELC; Spriggs, 2020). In addition to advocating for more Black C-suite executives and board members, the organization works to prepare the next generation of African American leaders by maintaining open channels of opportunity for the development of

Black executives and Black entrepreneurs (Spriggs, 2020). Through examining the experiences of African American midlevel managers in seeking and maintaining leadership roles in Fortune 500 companies, this study has provided information that corporations can draw on in designing initiatives such as the ELC to support diversity and equity in organizations across the United States.

Conclusion

African Americans remain highly underrepresented in corporate leadership positions (Randel et al., 2021). I addressed the limited understanding of corporate midlevel African Americans' difficulty in seeking and maintaining senior leadership positions in Fortune 500 companies. The findings of this research addressed the single research question and two subquestions:

RQ: What are the collective experiences of corporate midlevel African Americans in seeking promotions and maintaining senior leadership positions in Fortune 500 companies?

SQ1: What are the collective experiences of corporate midlevel African American men in seeking promotions and maintaining senior leadership positions in Fortune 500 companies?

SQ2: What are the collective experiences of corporate midlevel African American women in seeking promotions and maintaining senior leadership positions in Fortune 500 companies?

This study has shown that many issues remain to be addressed. These can be addressed by focusing on the creation of strong critical leaders, as posited by Santamaría et al. (2022), who can create inclusive working environments that are enabling, with leaders that work directly to disrupt negative stereotypes, that utilize consensus building in their

management practices and model action-oriented and reflective leadership that model socially conscious leadership to African Americans aspiring to leadership positions in corporate America.

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Appendix A: Interview Protocol

Introduction

Hello. My name is Teresa. I am a doctorate student at Walden University, and I am interested in the collective experiences of corporate midlevel African Americans' difficulty in seeking and maintaining senior leadership positions in Fortune 500 companies as well as to comparing the collective experiences of male and female African Americans. Thank you for volunteering to join my study. Your insights will be used to potentially understand the phenomenon of the underrepresentation of African Americans in corporate leadership positions.

As your participation is voluntary, you may choose to pause or stop the interview or withdraw from the study at any point without consequences. You will also not be receiving any rewards from completing the study. Your participation entails taking part in this individual interview, as well as to answer clarifying or follow-up questions and taking part in the transcription verification process in which I will be requesting you to review the accuracy of your responses and the transcription of the interview.

I will be assigning a pseudonym to protect your identity. Please be as detailed and honest as possible in responding to the interview questions. If any names or potential risks to your identity are mentioned in the interview, they will be redacted in the transcription and in the write-up. All the information collected from you will be accessible only to me and my dissertation committee. The digital copies of the data will be kept in an encrypted device and cloud storage. All of the data will be permanently deleted 5 years upon the conclusion of this study.

To ensure that I accurately capture your responses, this interview will be recorded. Are you ready to begin?

Demographic Questions

1. What age bracket do you belong to: 20-29, 30-39, 40-49, 50-59, 60+?
2. What is your highest educational attainment?
3. What is your current midlevel corporate leadership role?
4. How long have you been in your current position?
5. How long have you been working in the corporate setting?
6. What is your targeted senior-level corporate leadership role?

Opening Question

What life experiences do you believe contributed to your pursuit of a corporate leadership role?

Focusing Questions

1. How do you describe your journey towards a senior-level position in your workplace?

- a. How do you think your experiences in school influenced your pursuit of a senior-level position?
 - b. Growing up as an African American, how do you think your experiences at home and in the community influenced your pursuit of a senior-level position?
 - c. How do you describe your experiences in education relative to your current pursuit of a senior-level position?
 - d. How do you think your experiences at work influenced your pursuit of a senior-level position?
2. What successes and/or advantages have you experienced in pursuing a senior-level position in your workplace?
3. What struggles have you experienced in pursuing a senior-level position in your workplace?
4. When faced with struggles in your pursuit of a senior corporate leadership role, how do you make decisions?
 - a. What information do you use and how do you use the information to resolve the issues?
 - b. What do you think of other people's inputs into your decision-making process?
 - c. How do you consider risks and benefits when faced with decisions?
5. How do you convey your ideas with a diverse group of people at your workplace?
6. How is your relationship with your colleagues?
7. In pursuing a senior-level position, how have you navigated situations in which other people may have made assumptions or stereotypes about you based on different parts of your identities (e.g., race, gender)?
 - a. How did race and gender as parts of your identity influence your pursuit of a corporate leadership position?
 - b. Please describe an instance during which your racial and gender identity might have been in conflict and you had to either prioritize or reconcile the different parts of your identity as you pursued a corporate leadership position.
8. How do you think your experiences of pursuing a senior corporate leadership role differ from the experiences of individuals of other race and gender?
9. How did your experiences in your pursuit of a senior-level position shape you as a leader?
10. What experiences do you believe you have that challenged the oppressive systems that you encountered?
 - a. How did you react to the oppressive experience you encountered?
 - b. What did you do to address the oppressive experience you encountered?
 - c. Who supported your resistance to the oppressive systems?
11. Overall, how do you feel your experiences compare with those of other African Americans?

- a. Do you think they are typical? Atypical?
 - b. Please explain which and why you believe this.
12. How would you describe the effect of your gender, if any, on the experiences you have described?
 - a. If gender mattered, how and why?
 - b. If gender did not matter, why not?
13. What advice would you give to other African Americans seeking to pursue senior leadership positions in a Fortune 500 company?

Closing Question

Do you have anything else to add?

Conclusion

This concludes the interview. I appreciate your insights and contributions to this study. I will be transcribing this interview and will email you a copy of the transcription within the next two days. As part of establishing the trustworthiness of this study, please review the accuracy of the transcription. Feel free to make any changes in your responses as you see fit. Please return the edited transcript within seven days; otherwise, the transcript will be considered approved and ready for analysis. I may also reach out for clarifications and follow-up questions. Thank you for your time.

Appendix B: Site Permission

Date

Research Site's Official Name

Research Site Name

Research Site Address

Dear [Research Site's Official Name],

I am working on a doctoral dissertation, entitled, "[insert title]." My research will be overseen by my faculty mentor, [Mentor Name].

My research explores the collective experiences of corporate midlevel African Americans' regarding seeking promotions and maintaining corporate leadership positions in Fortune 500 companies in the United States, as well as to compare the collective experiences of male and female African Americans. I will be recruiting African Americans who are employed by a Fortune 500 company and have at least one year of experience in a midlevel position to participate in my study.

Specifically, I am requesting permission to post recruitment materials to recruit participants for my study.

This project will begin once I have obtained approval from Walden University's Institutional Review Board (IRB), which will review my study to ensure the adequacy of my plan for protecting participants.

Any data collected will be kept confidential. In accordance with Walden policy and best practices for ethical research, neither participants nor sites will be identified in any report of my findings or in my published dissertation. I will provide a copy of the aggregate results from this study upon your request.

If you have any concerns about this request, please contact me at the phone number listed below.

Sincerely,

Teresa Roberson

[Researcher's Contact Information]

Appendix C: Recruitment Email

Subject line:

Interviewing African Americans in midlevel positions in **(insert month here)**

Email message:

There is a new study exploring the collective experiences of African Americans regarding seeking promotions and maintaining corporate leadership positions in Fortune 500 companies in the United States, as well as comparing the collective experiences of male and female African Americans. For this study, you are invited to describe your experiences as an African American in a midlevel corporate position.

About the study:

- One 45–60-minute online interview that will be audio recorded
- You will be asked to check your interview transcript
- You will not be paid to participate in this study
- To protect your privacy, the published study would use fake names

Volunteers must meet these requirements:

- 18 years old or older
- Employed by a Fortune 500 company
- Has at least one year of experience in a midlevel position
- Identify as African American
- Legally permitted to discuss issues relating to promotion (not bound by nondisclosure agreements)

This interview is part of the doctoral study for Teresa L. Roberson, a Ph.D. student at Walden University. Interviews will take place during 11-22 September 2023.

Please respond to this email to let the researcher know of your interest. You are welcome to forward it to others who might be interested.

Appendix D: Informed Consent Form

You are invited to take part in a research study exploring the collective experiences of African Americans' regarding seeking promotions and maintaining corporate leadership positions in Fortune 500 companies in the United States, as well as comparing the collective experiences of male and female African Americans. 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 20 volunteers who:

- Are at least 18 years of age
- Are employed by a Fortune 500 company
- Have at least one year of experience in a midlevel position
- Identify as African American, and
- Is legally permitted to discuss issues relating to promotion (i.e., not bound by nondisclosure agreements).

This study is being conducted by a researcher named Teresa L. Roberson, who is a doctoral student at Walden University.

Study Purpose

The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore the collective experiences of African Americans regarding seeking promotions and maintaining corporate leadership roles in Fortune 500 companies in the United States, as well as to compare the collective experiences of male and female African Americans.

Procedures

This study will involve you completing the following steps:

- Undergo an individual online interview. This interview will be conducted through Zoom and will last for 45-60 minutes.
- Check the transcript of your interview. The transcript will be sent through email. It will take you about 20 minutes.

Here are some sample questions:

- What struggles have you experienced in pursuing a senior-level position in your workplace?
- How do you think your experiences of pursuing a senior corporate leadership role differs from the experiences of individuals of other races and genders?

- What advice would you give other African Americans seeking to pursue senior leadership positions in a Fortune 500 company?

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. Please note that not all volunteers will be asked to take part in this study.

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 providing information on the barriers encountered by African Americans in Fortune 500 companies and to help improve equity practices in these organizations. Once the analysis is complete, the researcher will share the overall results by publishing the study in peer reviewed journals and also present findings at conferences.

Payment

You will not receive any payment for participating in this study.

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 storing all data in password-protected files that only the researcher will have access to. To protect your privacy, no names will be used in this study. Instead, you will be assigned a code name. 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 calling [REDACTED] or emailing [REDACTED]. 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 08-24-23-1047080. It expires on August 23, 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

If you feel you understand the study and wish to volunteer, please indicate your consent by signing below using DocuSign.

Printed Name of Participant

Date of consent

Participant's Signature

Researcher's Signature

Appendix E: Code Book

Open codes	Sample quotes	Preliminary themes	Themes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • diverse internal network 	<p>“I think a lot of decision-making and promotions were really based on me knowing people in the organization.”</p>	Internal and external support sought by female African American midlevel managers	Seeking support
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • building external network 	<p>“Make sure I build my network externally, right? I don't have to rely on just this one organization is important.”</p>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • seek leaders' inputs 	<p>“I have to, you know, e-mail CC, my manager or the upper manager or see other people in there that knows it.”</p>	Leaders and mentors sought by male African American midlevel managers	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • seeking mentors' inputs 	<p>“I like to find people in whatever company I am that I respect that are way senior than me. I'm like, that's interesting, I like how they're doing it. I need to emulate whatever they're doing because obviously that's worked for them.”</p>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • building credentials 	<p>“Basically, my education and my experience are what got me to this position that I am now.”</p>	Education	Navigating workplace challenges
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • standing up for oneself 	<p>“I just really have to go in there with a chin up. Have confidence within myself and don't really let that get to me, and still perform my job well where it's able to speak for itself, and it's able to tell you I'm more than qualified to do what I need to do and I'm an asset to the team.”</p>	Speaking up for oneself	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • speaking up for oneself 	<p>“When I do come to you, I'm going to have four or five things and I'm going to have all my documentation. That's how I normally handle the situation.”</p>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • making others comfortable 	<p>“It's like one or two people that maybe you can fully be yourself...to make them feel more comfortable.</p> <p>“For example, in talking to someone who's already in a management role to get advice on what I need to do to move forward, an individual did say to me, ‘Maybe you should change your hair.”</p>	Code switching at work	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • changing oneself to fit in 			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • making oneself relatable 	<p>“That's part of the code switching, having to being relatable to making people feel comfortable.”</p>		

Open codes	Sample quotes	Preliminary themes	Themes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • not familiar with code switching 	<p>“What do you mean code-switching?”</p>		Experiences of discrimination in unfair standards and opportunities at the workplace
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • need to overachieve 	<p>“I was always told that you have to work twice as hard or do twice as much.”</p>	Achievements are overlooked	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • need to be careful in making mistakes 	<p>“Tracherous in that you have to constantly-- you have to day-to-day, I'll make the right move, or say the right thing, do the right thing, or your path may be derailed.”</p>	Mistakes are magnified	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • less opportunities 	<p>“I feel like demographics matter. If the hiring manager decides not to hire you based on your race, they can do that and not explain to you why.”</p>	Standards are different	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • attacked by non-Black colleagues 	<p>“Also being folks that attack people in the workplace, or older White women that also are those that attack younger Black women in the workplace.”</p>	Experiences of blatant attacks and disrespect	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • gender discrimination 	<p>“There was several situations where the leadership in that entity were-- There was, like I said, blatant, not treating people with respect, getting into shouting matches with people on the floor and everything.”</p>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • age discrimination 	<p>“They are usually, to be honest, women, so it's usually Latinx and White women who are in there late 50s, early 60s, who tend to have issues with younger, particularly Black women.”</p>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • disrespect 	<p>“It's unpleasant, you know. And there are several colleagues who are pretty difficult to work with in the sense that like. I'd rather just do it myself or ask somebody else. And that's not just with me, so I don't know if it's because I'm African American or because I'm younger or because I came from externally.”</p>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • aggressive 	<p>“Especially I'm dark-skinned, six-four, so, intimidating.”</p>	Experiences of being stereotyped as aggressive at the workplace due to being Black	

Open codes	Sample quotes	Preliminary themes	Themes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • angry Black woman 	<p>“Because there are cultural differences, it's seen in a negative like so like if I'm really upset about something, it might not really even be. It may be perceived. As like aggressive or oh, she's the angry Black woman.”</p>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • others' low expectations 	<p>“They may look at that resume, and say...Oh, this is a Black person. they may not have the education or if they do say that they have the education, it may not be from a good school.”</p>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • lack of representation 	<p>“For me, I think it was not seeing enough corporate representation in my community.”</p>	Experiences of the lack of guidance and support in pursuing career growth	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • lack of support 	<p>“It was very challenging. I had to learn how to navigate some things on my own.”</p>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • lack of mentors 	<p>“I needed someone to hold my hand and tell me, ‘Okay, this is what you want to do.’ I never had a mentor.”</p>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • transactional approach to decision-making 	<p>“In terms of decision-making, I do keep my heart in it a little bit, but I have to remove that personal feeling for it. I have to make it more of a transactional type of decision. I feel like if it's not my own business, I can't give it my all.”</p>	Consideration for consequences	Making career decisions as a male African American midlevel manager
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • maintaining professional boundaries 	<p>“I'd say my relationship with my colleagues is good. Like I said, we are remote, so there's not a ton of interaction, but it's good. We have just general conversation. I meet with my team three times a week and it all seems well. There's not really a whole lot to go into there.”</p>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • consideration of others' professional opinions when making decisions 	<p>“I just go to people that I trust and not necessarily older. One of the people who I think closely as an advisor, he's a fraternity brother of mine. He graduated a year before me. He had been in that financial space longer and I really valued his opinion.”</p>	Consideration for inputs of leaders and mentors	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • support available for midlevel manager African American men 	<p>“I have the close directors that I work with, have been super supportive through my journey.”</p>		

Open codes	Sample quotes	Preliminary themes	Themes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • using data and regulations to make decisions 	<p>"I can pull data and advise them, but I really don't take really big risks on their behalf."</p>	Professional inputs	Making decisions as a female African American midlevel manager
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • consideration of others' professional input when making decisions 	<p>"For me, if it's coming from a manager, I'm taking it very seriously."</p>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • parents' influence 	<p>"My mother worked as an accountant. My father worked in the tech space. I think he had a finance degree. There was also-- not overt, but it was told to me that it made sense to get a business degree. What I was interested in ended up being more marketing and advertising. It worked out."</p>	Personal life	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • wanting to be a representation for daughter 	<p>"I have a nine-year-old daughter, so I'm big on Black girl magic and I want her to see that you can do anything that you put your mind to as long as you work towards it."</p>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • pursuit of financial security 	<p>"Really, the goal was always just to be able to support myself, get through school so that you can better support yourself...It's just like you can make money to support yourself and assist your family."</p>		