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Exploring the Career Advancement of African American Women Within Senior Leadership in Federal Law Enforcement

Mary Ellen Mack Dickey
Walden University

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Walden University

College of Psychology and Community Services

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Mary Ellen Mack Dickey

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,
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the review committee have been made.

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Walden University
2024

Abstract

Exploring the Career Advancement of African American Women Within Senior
Leadership in Federal Law Enforcement

by

Mary Ellen Mack Dickey

MA, University of Phoenix, 2007

BS, University of Phoenix, 2006

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Psychology

Walden University

May 2024

Abstract

African American women who retired or currently work in senior leadership roles within federal law enforcement agencies continuously deal with various biases. However, there is limited qualitative research of African American women in senior leadership.

Therefore, the purpose of this interpretive phenomenological study is aimed to uncover the reasons behind the disparate and discriminatory treatment experienced by these women and explore opportunities. Fourteen African American women were interviewed to obtain information related to the central research question. Results revealed three themes and three subthemes (1) Mental and spiritual welfare; the subthemes emerged were: (a) self-confidence, (b) leveraging relationships, and (c) training opportunities. (2) Stagnation of African American senior female leaders; the subthemes emerged were: (a) Black feminist thought theory, (b) Intersectionality, and (c) Glass ceiling theory. (3) Value of mentorship and support; the subthemes emerged were: (a) mentors, (b) leadership support, and (c) networking. The study investigated the potential impact of diversity and inclusion on promotional opportunities for African American women in senior leadership while bridging the representation gap. Drawing upon intersectionality theory, Black feminist thought theory, and the glass ceiling theory, the study delved into the challenges faced by African American women in senior leadership positions (e.g., GS-15 and Senior Executive Service roles) within the federal law enforcement. The findings and recommendations could impact social change by increasing awareness of diversity and equitable representation of African American women in senior leadership and senior executive service roles within federal law enforcement agencies.

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Dedication

The dedication of this dissertation goes to my loving and devoted husband Abraham Dickey, Jr. It is the result of his love, patience, and his continuous support that allowed me to achieve this goal. His encouragement throughout this process has been unwavering and indeed appreciated. Thank you for being my life partner, my greatest support system, and confidant. Your support from the beginning of my advanced education experience has always been encouraging and I am grateful to have the love of my life shared in the celebration of something that was at times exhausting, but in the end, priceless.

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I also want to acknowledge my best friend, Constance Stitt, our friendship has only been strengthened with her consistent and selfless support throughout this process. Lastly, yet most importantly, I give honor and glory to my heavenly father, Jesus Christ. My faith allowed me to push forward through this ever-daunting task, and through it all, I have always placed my trust in the Lord. “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me” (Philippians 4:13).

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

For years, women in federal law enforcement have reported levels of unequal treatment and underrepresentation in senior leadership positions (Gurman, 2018) compared to their White male counterparts (Cook & Glass, 2014). Research that evaluated the lived experiences of African American women in federal law enforcement within senior leadership positions is sparse at best. Studies have focused on women in law enforcement, African American women in law enforcement, women of color in law enforcement, African American men and women in law enforcement, and African American men in law enforcement; however, there are very limited studies representing only African American women who are sworn federal law enforcement officials within senior leadership positions. This level of unfair treatment is even more heightened for African American women compared to their White male counterparts (Cook & Glass, 2014). According to Cook and Glass (2014), although African American women are qualified for senior leadership positions, they still are not afforded career advancement opportunities that are given to their male counterparts. Chapter 1 includes the background of the study, problem statement, purpose of the study, research questions, conceptual framework, and the nature of the study. Also included in the chapter are definitions, assumptions, scope and delimitations, limitations, the significance of the study, and summary.

Background of the Study

As discussed by Bolton and Feagin (2004), law enforcement has always been known as a good ole boys club consisting of White men, free from the inclusion of

women and minorities. This mindset has created a culture that has extended even into today's society (Galloway, 2016). While the number of women and minorities has grown in this workforce, it is still a challenge for women and minorities to advance into leadership positions within law enforcement (Goulding, 2005).

Research has revealed the disparate treatment of African American women in the United States at all levels of professions, exacerbating the gap in senior leadership positions (Jawando et al., 2016). Gurman (2018) mentioned how there is a lack of understanding regarding why women are not applying for senior leadership positions. Yu (2015b) stated the small amount of research that explored women in federal law enforcement discussed the glass ceiling effect and its barriers. Although studies displayed the struggle women have concerning promotional advancement in leadership positions, Babers (2016) discussed how these barriers are even worse for African American women in law enforcement due to their race and gender and referred to the challenges as a "concrete ceiling." This term was coined from the glass ceiling effect in reference to the disparate and discriminatory treatment that African American women endure throughout their career progression (Carli & Eagly, 2015).

Research regarding African American women in senior leadership positions in federal law enforcement is sparse, and further research is needed to close the gap (Greene, 2000). The level of injustice is systemic; the disparate treatment of African American women compared to their White male coworkers is based on both race and gender (Key et al., 2012). African American women have a more difficult time getting promoted compared to their White male counterparts (Gurman, 2018; Wyatt & Silvester,

2015). Therefore, researchers have continued to explore federal law enforcement organizations and how discrimination and stereotypes are frequently identified in federal law enforcement environments. Yu (2015a) revealed a high level of gender barriers. Among these barriers were negative attitudes of male colleagues which elevated the glass ceiling effect, leading to fewer senior level role models, an increase in discrimination and sexual harassment, and a lack of work-life balance for women (Brancu, 2018; Johns, 2013; Yu, 2015b). Failure to have a proportionate number of African American women leaders in law enforcement may impede officers' abilities to interact with and understand the culture of the populations they served.

In 2011, President Obama's Executive Order 13,583, *Establishing a Coordinated Government Wide Initiative to Promote Diversity and Inclusion in the Federal Workforce*, renewed interest in federal policing employment tools (Exec. Order No. 13,583, 2011). Researchers have reported that there are over 120,000 sworn federal officers who work in over 100 federal law enforcement agencies in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, U.S. territories, and foreign countries; however, only 15.5% are women (Bumgarner, 2006; Reaves, 2012; Yu, 2018b). Therefore, law enforcement agencies will need to promote African American women at proportions consistent with the population they served (Gómez, 2015). To change these disproportionate levels, careful thought and consideration of policy and procedures are required.

Approximately 43% of jobs within the federal government are held by women (Ripley, 2017). Although federal law enforcement is the highest-ranking law enforcement organization, it still has underrepresented women to a greater degree than other law

enforcement agencies (Ripley, 2017). For decades, women only held about 14% of positions in federal law enforcement agencies (Ripley, 2017). Soon after Ripley's (2017) study, Duffin (2019) revealed how women's representation dropped to 12.6% in 2018. An analysis of the problem could have implications for social change within federal law enforcement agencies. By exploring the identified barriers that African American women in senior leadership experience in federal law enforcement, agencies could develop diversity and inclusive leadership courses and mentoring programs for senior leadership members to improve the inclusiveness of African American women in senior leadership positions. The efforts to improve the representation of African American women in senior leadership positions can develop diversity and inclusion within senior leadership positions.

Problem Statement

Today's societal issues and concerns have law enforcement at the forefront, from law enforcement officers' misconduct issues to the value of diversity and inclusion within federal law enforcement agencies. African American women have been extremely underrepresented in federal law enforcement agencies and their leadership positions (Duffin, 2019; Ripley, 2017; Yu, 2018b). Although U.S. federal law enforcement agencies have expanded rapidly over the past 2 decades, they are still male dominated (Duffin, 2019; Ripley, 2017; Yu, 2018b). There is still a gender gap in federal law enforcement as women accounted for 14% of federal law enforcement jobs in 1996 and approximately 15% in 2018 (Ripley, 2017). At this rate, Ripley explained that it would take about 700 years before women held half of federal law enforcement jobs.

Similarly, leadership positions in federal law enforcement agencies remained male dominated, with women accounting for less than a third of leadership positions (Duffin, 2019; Ripley, 2017; Yu, 2018b). Since the 1972 passage of the Equal Employment Opportunity Act, most research on women in law enforcement has focused on female officers working in local or state law enforcement (Hill et al., 2022; Rushin, 2021; Yu, 2015b). However, there are differences between federal law enforcement and local and state law enforcement agencies (Yu, 2018a, 2018b). Research focusing on female federal law enforcement officers is sparse (Barratt et al., 2011; Carter, 2021; Schulz, 2009; Yu, 2020a). Moreover, there is a gap in the literature regarding African American women who are senior leaders in federal law enforcement.

Researchers have found that female law enforcement officers, including federal law enforcement officers, can have a positive effect on community engagement as well as the overall performance of law enforcement agencies, such as helping to reduce the use of excessive force and fatal shootings (Duffin, 2019; Modiano, 2016; Ripley, 2017). During 2018 to 2020, the first woman to serve as Chief of the United States Border Patrol pointed out that having more women, including more African American women, helps in improving the Border Patrol agency's mission, such as helping to defuse tense situations (Ripley, 2017).

By better understanding the experiences of African American women in senior leadership roles in federal law enforcement, steps can be taken to improve their work environment and the career progression for future African American women in this field. The study's findings will be directed at federal law enforcement employers, senior

executives, and senior leaders as findings may be used to develop and improve promotion policies and practices. Therefore, mentorship programs geared toward increasing the percentage of African American women in federal law enforcement leadership positions will help minimize biases. The impartial treatment has hindered African American women from promoting into senior leadership positions in law enforcement and other organizations (Marshall, 2013; Matthies et al., 2016; Schwanke, 2013).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this phenomenological research was to add literature to the field of criminal justice by providing a study that explores the perceptions of 13 African American women who are senior leaders in federal law enforcement. My goal for the study was to reveal these women's lived experiences about their progression to their current position. In addition, I explored significant factors that negatively and positively affected African American women's advancement to their current positions. This research builds on recommendations for other African American women seeking to advance to senior leadership in this career field. Catalyst (2004) identified how women's success in the workforce was based on building networks to achieve success. These various levels of networks (formal and informal) defined the obstacles for African American women's advancement to senior leadership positions in law enforcement (Catalyst, 2023). In this study, I collected data using in-depth, semistructured interviews via the online meeting platform Zoom with a purposeful sample of 13 African American women who retired or currently work as senior leaders in federal law enforcement.

Research Questions

In this qualitative phenomenological research study, I addressed one central research question: What are the perceptions of senior African American women leaders in federal law enforcement about their lived experiences as they progressed to their current position?

Two subquestions were also considered:

1. What meanings emerge from the lived experiences of African American women who retired or are currently holding senior leadership positions in federal law enforcement as they navigate the complexities of intersectionality within their careers?
2. How do the lived experiences of African American women who retired or are currently in senior leadership roles within federal law enforcement shape their strategies and decisions?

Conceptual Framework

The research examined the importance of African American women in senior leadership positions and their lived experiences in federal law enforcement. The conceptual framework of a research study correlated with categorized themes and data gained from the study's participants (Creswell & Guetterman, 2018). The conceptual framework for this research study included Crenshaw's (1989) intersectionality theory, Collins's (1990) Black feminist thought theory, and the glass ceiling theory (Powell & Butterfield, 2015). A brief discussion of each theory is provided in this section, with a more detailed review in Chapter 2.

Intersectionality Theory

Intersectionality theory defined the social categorizations of race, gender, and social construct that defined the treatment of African American women who are shown disparate treatment within federal law enforcement organizations. Crenshaw (1989) coined the term “intersectionality” based on Black women’s inability to relate to the feminist movement of White women. The intersectionality theory is also known as the social construct of reality and defined by the interaction between one’s lived experiences with others in society (Sesko & Biernat, 2010). Crenshaw (Columbia Law School, 2017) discussed how organizations that are male dominated still struggle with creating a work environment that is not discriminatory toward women and minorities, especially in law enforcement cultures. This effect extended to discrimination, disparate treatment, oppression, and barriers within the work environment that African American women experience in senior leadership positions, which do not extend to other races or genders. Intersectionality does not apply White privilege as White men in the workforce do not receive this unfair treatment; to a certain extent, this privilege is also granted to White women, but never African American women (Columbia Law School, 2017). Another issue that African American women deal with in the workforce concerning intersectionality is the term “women and minorities,” both of which they are considered first when it comes to attaining a position in senior leadership within the federal government (Bowleg, 2012). Because of the general notion that African American women in senior leadership positions in federal law enforcement suffered from systemic

racism and oppression in the workforce, this theory's concept is often extended to the Black feminist thought theory.

Black Feminist Thought Theory

Black feminist thought is used to lay the foundational framework for understanding the lived experiences of African American women in senior leadership positions in federal law enforcement agencies. Collins's (2015) Black feminist thought explored the *outsider within* concept. The outsider within was the African American women who worked in White people's homes in a domestic role; however, they were never accepted as a member of the household regardless of how many years they were a domestic caregiver for that family.

This same concept is a part of their lived experiences even in today's workforce. African American women have always suffered discrimination, oppression, barriers, and a heightened level of disparate treatment within every facet in the United States. Systematic discrimination within society has always exacerbated injustice for certain groups. Therefore, it is presumed that African American women in senior leadership positions in federal law enforcement organizations would experience this same type of mistreatment. Collins's (2000) Black feminist thought theory highlights the reasons why African American women continuously dealt with barriers that are riddled with discrimination, disparate treatment, and oppression within the workplace and within society.

Glass Ceiling Theory

The glass ceiling theory examined how individuals are discriminated against based on their race and gender, referring to women in their career progression within a male-dominant culture. According to Tebo (2003), the glass ceiling effect is inclusive of African American women's exclusion from leadership positions in law enforcement (Powell & Butterfield, 2015). Although Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 allowed career opportunities, African American women were still not accepted into leadership roles in organizations dominated by White men (Hoggett et al., 2019). Even today, African American women are not received by the leaders in this male-dominant profession and are faced with discrimination, harassment, sexual harassment, retaliation, and the withholding of career advancement opportunities (Brooks, 2019). Research has revealed that although women have been in law enforcement for decades, African American women still face resistance to career advancement opportunities in senior leadership positions (Fernandes, 2016; Marshall, 2013; McLeod, n.d.; Swan, 2016).

Nature of the Study

In this phenomenological research study, I explored the lived experiences of 14 African American women who are senior leaders in federal law enforcement about their progression to their current position. Wincup (2017) stated that it is imperative to understand the social landscape of the participants. As discussed in Slevitch (2011), the qualitative approach is used to understand the problem and reveal the description of the impacted population. The data gathered from the participants' lived experiences will allow leaders in federal law enforcement to gain a better perspective regarding the

representation of African American women within their profession. I chose the phenomenological research design because it allows the “researcher to focus on people’s experiences of a phenomenon to obtain comprehensive details that provide a basis for reflective structural analysis that ultimately reveals the essence of the experience” (Bliss, 2016, p. 14). A qualitative, phenomenological research design provided an understanding by revealing the meaning that underpins African American women’s lived experiences of attaining senior leadership positions (Moustakas, 1994; Waugh & Waugh, 2003).

The study employed data analysis techniques involving transforming raw data by analyzing, synthesizing, and interpreting the data and placing them in categories based on the relationships within the study (Maxwell, 2013). I used Delve software to manage all data and analyze all data using Moustakas’s (1994) modified van Kaam method of analysis. I conducted semistructured interviews and transcribed the interviews verbatim (see Creswell, 2014; Sesko & Biernat, 2010). The interview questions allowed these women the opportunity to identify biases through qualitative research so federal law enforcement agencies can better address this group’s underrepresentation, barriers, and disparate treatment through the development of policies and procedures, leadership diversity and inclusion courses, succession planning, and mentoring programs. These approaches may influence and enhance the representation of African American women in federal law enforcement through their lived experiences and provide a pathway to address the inequalities they encountered as they progressed in their current position.

Definitions of Terms

Senior federal law enforcement leaders: In this study, senior federal law enforcement leaders are defined as federal government employees whose general schedule pay scale is 15 (GS-15) as well as those at the senior executive service (SES) grade level whose positions are beyond GS-15, and who work for any of the 65 U.S. federal law enforcement agencies (see Partnership for Public Service, 2022).

Discrimination: “Behavior or actions, usually negative, towards an individual or group of people, especially on the basis of sex/race/social class” (McLeod, n.d., para. 3).

Diversity: The existence of differences within a particular setting. This is inclusive of gender, race, ethnicity, religion, nationality, sexual orientation, place of practice, and practice type (Tan, 2019).

Assumptions

In this section, the assumptions in this study are discussed. Assumptions are statements that the researcher presumes to be true, which may be temporary or for a specific purpose such as creating a theory (Vogt & Johnson, 2016). In this qualitative research study, I made the following assumptions: I assumed that all study participants would be eager to tell their story about their lived experiences in their senior leadership role regarding their career advancement. Next, I assumed that all participants involved would be truthful in their responses throughout the interview and would understand that their responses are not about the researcher or the study, but about their lived experiences. Then, I assumed the information gathered from the interviews would be helpful in exploring the responses provided by the participants. Lastly, I assumed the

findings would enable federal law enforcement employers, executives, senior department leaders, and human resource professionals to reorganize their career progression strategy through ongoing mentoring programs and advanced leadership initiatives.

Scope and Delimitations

This study's main goal was to explore the lived experiences of African American women in senior leadership positions in federal law enforcement. Sesko and Biernat (2010) discussed the delimitations that focus on the scope and boundaries for research studies. There are four delimitations which involve the participants: African American ethnicity, a woman, retired or currently in a senior leadership position, and working in a federal law enforcement agency. Therefore, this study was limited by ethnicity, gender, work role, and employment agency. This study aimed to promote social change that will provide career advancement opportunities for African American women in senior leadership in federal law enforcement. Therefore, the participants' lived experiences in federal law enforcement leadership positions may not represent the experiences of other African American women in senior leadership positions in other fields. Because of the sample, the research findings may not be applicable to the general population.

Limitations

Creswell (2014) discussed the limitations of qualitative research, which determine the usefulness of the research findings. One limitation of this study is the sample size. This study used the lived experiences of 14 participants to represent the amount of African American women in senior leadership positions in federal law enforcement; therefore, these lived experiences cannot collectively cover the differences of this

population. However, the data will reflect how African American women are underrepresented in senior leadership positions in federal law enforcement agencies. Another limitation is that biases against African American women may influence the data. These biases are based on societal norms and both the personal and professional experiences of African American women. African American women's lived experiences, values, and cultural beliefs may influence the interpretation of the data. Although the awareness of one's biases may be known, the human element in research may influence the findings of the study.

Significance of the Study

This study may be unique and important because research is lacking on the lived experiences of African American women in senior leadership positions in federal law enforcement organizations. It is understood that one's perception is their reality. Therefore, it is imperative to conduct research that will allow society to gain a level of perspective to address the challenges African American women face during their career advancements. Findings may be used to assess whether senior leaders recognize the importance of working in unison and the need to set high standards throughout the organization for senior leaders and all federal officers (Warren, n.d.). Findings may also be used to assess whether there is a need to further develop federal law enforcement agencies' comprehensive strategic plan, which should include succession planning, where employees are recruited and developed to fill leadership roles within the company (Hossain, 2019). This cannot be done to its full potential without the implementation of succession planning within the federal government. The importance of this study also

extends to society as a whole; because these leaders are dedicated to their mission of protecting and serving the public, they can connect with officers and are thus equipped to perform their jobs, contributing to the agency's overall success.

Significance to Practice

The research literature concerning the mistreatment of African American women in senior leadership positions within federal law enforcement increases the knowledge of SES leaders, senior management, and human resource management on the level of discrimination, disparate treatment, and organizational barriers, all of which lead to the underrepresentation of African American women in senior leadership positions. Research at the federal law enforcement level lacks in relation to effective organizational leadership (El Sayed et al., 2019). The organizations that may benefit from this empirical research study include any organization that has a diverse population. The findings will allow all local, state, and federal law enforcement entities the opportunity to implement effective changes that will address discrimination, disparate treatment, and organizational barriers within the law enforcement workforce.

Significance to Theory

The intersectionality theory, Black feminist thought theory, and the glass ceiling theory are imperative in explaining why African American women holding senior leadership positions in federal law enforcement is necessary. These theories highlight how the intersecting social constructs of race and sex cause women to have increasing difficulties with climbing the ranks to senior leadership. This study will contribute to the theoretical knowledge base of the glass ceiling theory by exploring the impact it has on

African American women in senior leadership in federal law enforcement. This phenomenological study is significant because it addressed the leadership employment gap as outlined by the glass ceiling theory to explore the social construct of senior leadership positions within federal law enforcement.

Significance to Social Change

The evaluated lived experiences of African American women in senior leadership positions may impact federal law enforcement agencies in a positive manner through identified strategies. These plans of actions may inspire other African American women to pursue career advancement in senior leadership positions in federal law enforcement. The findings will be directed to the senior leaders, policy makers, and training departments; this may enable them to implement the changes agency wide. The broader population this study could affect would be people of color. This population would benefit if agency leaders and human resource management used the data from this study to address barriers to the employment of African American women. Addressing these barriers may create an efficient and effective diverse workforce that will build competent leadership behaviors, promote diversity, and enhance positive organizational cultures.

Summary and Transition

This qualitative study relied on semistructured interview questions to understand the intersectionality of how race and gender impacted the mistreatment of the studied population. In Chapter 1, I introduced the focus of the study to explore the disparate treatment, discrimination, and the lack of career progression regarding the representation of African American women in senior leadership within federal law enforcement. The

chapter contained a description of the problem: that African American women in senior leadership face barriers concerning career progression and discrimination. This chapter also discussed the selected conceptual frameworks used in the study. Finally, I introduced the nature of the study, the key concepts, the assumptions of the study, scope and delimitations, limitations, and significance of the study. In Chapter 2, the literature review, I discuss federal law enforcement and the conceptual frameworks used to guide this research. The review includes an in-depth discussion of the lived experiences of African American women throughout their career advancement within senior leadership positions.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This qualitative phenomenological study explored African American women's lived experiences of the barriers they faced and overcame when ascending into senior leadership positions within federal law enforcement agencies. Therefore, this chapter explores the continued disparate treatment and underrepresentation of African American women in senior leadership positions in federal law enforcement through the lens of the glass ceiling theory (Collins, 1986), intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1989), and Black feminist thought (Collins, 1986). It is important to highlight women's unique experiences in federal law enforcement (Garland et al., 2018; Yu, 2018a), including African American women. African American women are underrepresented in federal law enforcement leadership positions as they are not promoted as frequently as their male and Caucasian female counterparts and often do not report discrimination due to distrusting the process, or fear of retaliation (Gurman, 2018). This chapter covers the literature search strategies and the conceptual framework of the study. The subsequent literature review provides insight into the following topics: (a) types of leadership styles in senior federal law enforcement, (b) leadership effectiveness and senior federal law enforcement leaders, (c) African American women in federal law enforcement senior leadership, and (d) satisfaction of African American women as senior leaders in federal law enforcement.

Literature Search Strategy

The literature search strategies that I used included a comprehensive search in Walden University Library databases, including Academic Search Complete, EBSCOhost, ProQuest Central, SAGE Journals Online, Ebook Central, PsycARTICLES,

PsycBOOKS, and PsycINFO. In addition, I searched Google Scholar to find relevant literature. I searched for additional scholarly sources by examining the reference sections of articles, books, dissertations, and theses uncovered in initial searches.

The search terms included *African American women*, *White men or White women*, *law enforcement*, *senior federal law enforcement leaders*, *disparate treatment*, *biases*, *discrimination*, *leadership style and characteristics*, *transformational leadership*, *transactional leadership*, and *police officers*. The search included seminal literature, but my focus was on current peer-reviewed literature published within the last 5 years. Research is sparse in relation to African American women in federal law enforcement senior leadership positions. Most research has focused on local law enforcement leaders. In addition, research is lacking on the leadership styles and characteristics of African American women as senior leaders. To address that lack of research, this literature review examines senior federal law enforcement leaders' leadership styles, characteristics, and organizational effectiveness. In addition, the review notes how the leadership training of African American women in senior federal law enforcement has contributed to African American women's leadership effectiveness, addresses biases, and eliminates discrimination.

Conceptual Framework

The research examined the importance of African American women in senior leadership positions and their lived experiences in federal law enforcement. The conceptual framework of a research study correlates with categorized themes and data gained from the study's participants and how the researcher identified with the details of

the information (Creswell & Guetterman, 2018). The conceptual framework for this research study is Crenshaw's (1989) intersectionality theory, Collins's (1986) Black feminist thought theory, and the glass ceiling theory (Collins, 1986).

Intersectionality Theory

Crenshaw (1989) coined the term "intersectionality" based on race, sex, and the social norms that related to the feminist movement that focused on White women to the exclusion of African American women. Intersectionality is also known as the social construct of reality and is defined by the interaction between one's lived experiences with others in society (Sesko & Biernat, 2010). The concept of this approach is to understand how social biases can impact the experience of discrimination among a particular group of people. The intersectionality approach is at the center of racism, discrimination, inequalities, biases, and disparate practices embedded in workforce organizations. The implementation of the intersectionality approach can allow the targeted group an opportunity to have a voice that enables them to reveal their lived experiences, address their underrepresentation, and eliminate the disparate treatment their White colleagues will never encounter.

Intersectionality theory defines the social constructs of race and gender that underlie the disparate treatment of African American women within federal law enforcement organizations. Crenshaw (Columbia Law School, 2017) discussed how White male-dominant organizations such as law enforcement continue to struggle with creating a work environment that is not discriminatory toward women and minorities. Yu (2020b) discussed how law enforcement leaders tend to evaluate race and gender through

the lens of White men; this lens cannot generate the reality of either population. This effect extends to discrimination, disparate treatment, oppression, and barriers within the work environment that African American women in senior leadership positions experience more frequently than other leaders. Intersectionality does not apply to White privilege as White men in the workforce do not receive this unfair treatment; to a certain extent, this privilege is also granted to White women but never African American women (Columbia Law School, 2017).

Although there have been discussions on the White feminist movement and the inclusion of African American men (Shin et al., 2017), neither of these discussions were inclusive of African American women's acceptance in the workforce. The level of exclusion and reflections of racism and sexism led to African American women advocates shining a light on this systemic problem (Gopaldas, 2015). Bowleg (2012), through the lens of intersectionality, examined the experiences of women whose marginalization stems from various means of exclusion and oppression. The framework of intersectionality is necessary with regards to the understanding of individuals or groups whose main purpose is to oppress women and minorities from societal norms (Bowleg, 2012; Shin et al., 2017). The main areas of concentration to address intersectionality for this study included (a) the different forms of acceptance concerning social identity and how it is displayed throughout society, (b) how individuals of the selected group are treated like they are invisible and consistently marginalized, and (c) the societal norms that identify the most common inequalities of the oppressed group (Bowleg, 2012).

Although there is progress in the promotion of minority women in senior management, there are still concerns of underrepresentation in various organizations. For example, Salmons (2017) examined how intersectionality theory used the knowledge of significant life experiences to define societal norms as well as organizational practices. The intersectionality lens allowed a better understanding of how African American women in senior leadership positions are marginalized and how these actions against them drive the positive or negative actions of White women, White men, Black men, and other ethnic minorities toward African American women in society (Salmons, 2017).

Research studies have highlighted how the intersectionality framework reveals that African American men and women have similar yet differing experiences of withheld opportunities, unfairness, and underrepresentation within leadership positions (Collins, 2020). The levels of mistreatment can be eliminated when barriers of prejudice, discrimination, and understanding of African American women are removed to support their career advancement (Schwanke, 2013) to senior leadership positions.

Scholars have identified how intersectionality theory is the crux of understanding and making the necessary changes needed to impact social change based on the sex, gender, and experiences of individuals and groups (Shin et al., 2017). For example, Yu (2023) conducted a study using an intersectionality approach to examine race-based discrimination in federal law enforcement. The article examined minority and female officers' experiences of discrimination and the difference in their treatment compared to other races and genders. Yu found that White officers and minorities' responses were dramatically different regarding their experiences of behaviors and reporting workforce

discrimination. The findings also revealed that African American women experienced a significantly higher level of race-based discrimination than other minorities and minority men. Incorporating the intersectionality framework may thus allow for a better understanding of the workforce experiences of minorities and women who do not stand alone in their experiences (Yu, 2023).

The intersectionality theory is imperative in explaining why African American women in senior leadership positions in federal law enforcement is necessary. These women have faced increasing difficulties climbing the ranks within senior leadership during their careers; these difficulties are informed by the social constructs of race and sex. Although some may have succeeded, their numbers pale in comparison to those of their White counterparts. Once these women have attained the senior leader position, they face all levels of racism, harassment, and discrimination, and these barriers only increase as they continue to promote through the ranks (Sesko & Biernat et al., 2010). This level of discrimination toward African American women has created a workforce that is susceptible to potential lawsuits, making the law enforcement agencies sensitive to developing a multicultural organization (Barlow & Barlow, 2018). The importance of exploring intersectionality is to discover the influences of social biases, disparate treatment, and racism on the underrepresentation of African American women in senior leadership positions (Luna, 2016; Tarik & Syed, 2017). The work of intersectionality also addressed issues of Black feminist thought as it deals with the lived experiences of African American women in the workforce and their inequalities in life (Columbia Law School, 2017).

Black Feminist Thought Theory

The Black feminist thought theory came into existence based on the intersections of feminism and racism; this movement identified the unequal career advancement and the societal injustice for women and minorities (Collins, 1999). Black feminist thought stemmed from the civil rights movement, which related to the disenfranchisement of Blacks and the ultimate violation of human rights within society (Harding, 1992). Although White women faced unequal justice concerning feminism in society, this movement excluded African American women. This exclusion was the beginning of the second wave, since White women only focused on their concerns (Bell, 2004). The first wave also did not include poor White women, only the middle and upper-class White women as the focus of the movement (Hooks, 2000). Feminist movements like Betty Friedan's (1963) *The Feminine Mystique* were not in favor of addressing African American women's unfair and unequal treatment in society or within the workforce. Therefore, the Black feminist thought was used to lay the foundational framework of the lived experiences of African American women in senior leadership positions in federal law enforcement agencies.

Collins's (2015) Black feminist thought theory explored the concept of the outsider within, referring to the African American woman who worked in White people's homes in a domestic role but was never accepted as a member of the household regardless of how many years she was a domestic caregiver for that family. The dominant group, in this case White males, will always take control of minorities due to their advantageous placement within society (Collins, 2000). This same concept is a part of

minorities' lived experiences even in today's workforce. African American women have always suffered discrimination, oppression, barriers, and a heightened level of disparate treatment within every facet in the United States. Based on the small representation of African American women in federal law enforcement senior leadership positions, combined with the sparse research literature regarding these women in positions of authority, this study examined the gap of the underrepresentation of African American women in senior federal law enforcement leadership positions. The experiences of African American women are directly related to the feminist movement and the intersectionality of race and sex (Harris, 2007).

Collins (1986) revealed how the Black feminist thought theory has been used to uncover the common behaviors of Black women. As Black feminist thought continued to be used to evaluate African American women's experiences regarding their outsider within mindset, it also allowed for a renewed perspective to gain more momentum regarding the development and tenacity of this group of women (Collins, 1986). Collins (2000) discussed how insight and debates about African American feminism translates to power and how the researcher's influence can impact organizations and institutions. This reveals how power can impact Black feminist thought, which is used by several studies to incorporate the reflections and experiences of African American women to elucidate the type of treatment they endure throughout society. This power is implemented throughout the research process, leading to theoretical recommendations. The application of this theory is meant to help researchers examine the challenges African American women experience through research and the tools discovered to redefine their identity.

Several researchers have used the Black feminist thought theory as a framework to understand the perspective and lived experiences of African American women and how this population is affected by the social constructs of race and gender (Hamilton et al., 2009). Hamilton (2020) discussed the challenges of applying Black feminist thought to traditional masculine hierarchies of power. Hamilton's study revealed that applying Black feminist thought can assist researchers in developing methodologies and practices to navigate and critique masculine social structures. These practices can in turn help African American women to develop tools and strategies that enable them to navigate oppression.

Although African American women are qualified to gain entry-level positions in the workforce, they are not considered qualified for leadership positions by their oppressors (Knight et al., 2003). Today, African American women are now leaders within law enforcement organizations; this was not conceivable a few decades ago (Sesko & Biernat, 2010), although they are considerably fewer in number than their White colleagues (Igasaki, 2011). However, they face discrimination, biases, disparate treatment, and barriers that impact their career advancement in leadership positions for the betterment of society (DuMonthier et al., 2017). Despite the challenges African American women have experienced in the workplace and in society, they understand the tenacity that it takes to break through the systemic barriers to their advancement by learning what it takes to navigate the organization (Dubois, 2017). Even with the minimal literature discovered over the past 5 decades, recent studies have revealed that nonminority women do not encounter the same levels of discrimination as African

American women who deal with being overlooked for career progression assignments and promotional advancement opportunities (Thompson, 2017).

Systematic discrimination within society has always exacerbated injustice for certain groups. Therefore, it is presumed that African American women in senior leadership positions in federal law enforcement organizations would experience this same type of mistreatment. Collins's (1986) Black feminist thought theory highlights because African American women continuously deal with barriers that are riddled with discrimination, disparate treatment, and oppression within the workplace and within society. Self-definition is the ability to define one's own reality (Collins, 1986). This approach, viewed through the lens of Black feminist thought, created platforms for potential legalities, positions of authority, and future research. These women can now have a voice to share their story and provide their perspectives, perceptions, experiences, and the reality they lived as African American women in a workforce mired in systemic bias. They can reveal how they attained, maintained, and excelled in their positions.

Glass Ceiling Theory

The glass ceiling theory examined how individuals are discriminated against based on their race, gender, and other social barriers, referring to women's career advancement within a male-dominate culture (Collins, 1986). Glass ceiling theory revealed how women were blocked from obtaining senior management positions in organizations because of their gender. Cook and Glass (2014) defined the glass ceiling as an "artificial barrier" which eliminated "the advancement of minority men and all women into management and decision-making positions" (p. 3). Johns (2013) and Osibanjo

(2013) defined the glass ceiling as an unfair and discriminatory organizational barrier that not only hindered women from career advancements, but protected men, creating a male-dominant establishment. This attitude and behavior lend to Sesko and Biernat's (2010) identification of the "good old boy" network, which referred to men's refusal to accept women in the workplace. This reinforces the glass ceiling effect, which limits women's career advancement. The journey to promotional advancement for women in senior leadership compared to men is immensely different. For women to overcome these obstacles, they must identify the barriers that are implemented to impede their promotional advancement within organizations (Murray, 2016). Research reveals organizational restraints, stereotypes, biases, and barriers stemming from the glass ceiling (Carli & Eagly, 2015; Gamble & Turner, 2015; Johns, 2013; Rahman et al., 2016).

Yu (2020b) explored several career barriers for non-White and non-Hispanic women compared to their White female counterparts that were discovered by the U.S. Census Bureau, showing a dramatic difference in the level of mistreatment. Such mistreatment included lack of promotions, sexual and racial discrimination, and lack of diversity and inclusion. Yu discussed how non-White women not only experience negative attitudes from their male counterparts, but they also struggled with the ever-daunting ramifications of the glass ceiling effect.

Research has identified various strategies for women to combat the glass ceiling effect based on leadership mechanisms such as mentoring programs, workforce networking components, and leadership development programs through the sponsorship of executive members (Benschop et al., 2015; Downs et al., 2015; Hague & Okpala,

2017). This may make a difference for the overall impact of addressing these barriers. These strategies and initiatives may help develop other leadership opportunities that are necessary to overcome the glass ceiling for women in various workforces (Stewart, 2016).

In a research study on an African American CEO who mentored his colleague who was also African American, the CEO's actions created a safe working environment that allowed other leaders that mentored to do the same (Chin et al., 2016). This opportunity created a domino effect for other diverse ethnic groups in the workplace who desired to be in leadership. The findings revealed how mentoring can facilitate the career advancement of individuals who would not otherwise have the same opportunities as their White counterparts (Chin et al., 2016).

According to Tebo (2003), the glass ceiling effect is inclusive of African American women's exclusion from leadership positions in law enforcement (Powell & Butterfield, 2015). Collins (1986) and Cook and Glass (2014) discovered systematic barriers in society and organizations that hindered the promotional mobility of African American women and other women of color into senior leadership and executive positions (Johns, 2013). Research has revealed that although women have been in law enforcement for decades, African American women continue to face resistance to career advancement opportunities in senior leadership positions (Fernandes, 2016; Marshall, 2013; McLeod, n.d.; Swan, 2016). Xiang et al. (2017) discussed how the effects of the glass ceiling have crippled the career advancement of African American women due to the countless senior positions for which they are passed over. Babers (2016) and

Bachman (2017) discussed the concrete ceiling, used to describe the increasing levels of disparate and discriminatory actions used to elevate barriers that have been precisely used against African American women to keep them from promotional opportunities (Sesko & Biernat, 2010). Therefore, research also demonstrated that despite the daunting obstacles these women face, they have no recourse or support from senior management to gain promotional opportunities (Bachman, 2017). As the mistreatment of minority women continued to increase in the law enforcement arena, Blasdel's (2010) phenomenological study revealed how the glass ceiling effect was disproportionately impacting African American women in law enforcement compared to their male counterparts.

Yu (2020a) explored the occupational barriers of African American women against the barriers of White women in federal law enforcement and the stark contrast of how White men disproportionately mistreated African American women in the workforce. Yu's findings from a second quantitative study revealed there was a need to better understand the lived experiences of women of color. Therefore, Yu outlined the need for future research to determine the reasoning for the underrepresentation of African American women within senior leadership positions in federal law enforcement and how to increase their representation.

Literature Related to Key Concepts

Types of Leadership Styles in Senior Federal Law Enforcement

This research included a detailed discussion of two leadership styles: transformational and transactional. These two leadership styles have been noted as effective leadership styles in law enforcement (Decker, 2018; Fritsvold, 2019). Shim et

al. (2015) discovered that transformational leadership is connected to culture and commitment. This level of commitment created accountability and transparency within the workforce, community, and the agency, ultimately building trust for all involved. Transparency enabled transformational leaders to deal with corruption, build trust, and transform the organization. Sesko and Biernat (2010) discovered that leaders who were more engaging were more effective at inspiring their subordinates. These leaders' effective communication skills allowed the subordinates to achieve the leaders' expectations to gain the confidence needed to accomplish the mission (Sesko & Biernat, 2010). This appeared to be more consistent with transformational leadership. However, Bass's (1990) research findings highlighted that transactional leaders in cultural organizations often act, following policies and accepted norms which are based on the culture that leadership has created.

Transformational Leadership Style

Morse (2015) found that a large population of law enforcement officers were more accepting of leaders who exemplified transformational leadership characteristics. These leaders' ability to be consistent as they manage a positive and productive work environment gives the workforce motivation to do their jobs and facilitates their acceptance of change for the betterment of the organization. As transformational leaders demonstrate confidence in their workforce, they become role models to their subordinates, ultimately creating the culture for the organization (Gottschalk, 2011). Organization leadership cultures are defined and transformed by their leaders' conduct (Gottschalk, 2011; Sesko & Biernat, 2010). Dick and Metcalfe's (2007) article

concerning police departments used transformational leadership style training to improve senior management skill sets with the approval of the Police Leadership Development Board. Bass (1999) revealed the definition of transformational leadership as “the leader moving the follower beyond immediate self-interests through idealized influence (charisma), inspiration, intellectual stimulation, or individualized consideration” (p. 11). The four dimensions of transformational leadership discussed by Bass (1985), and later by Bono and Judge (2004), are as follows: The first dimension is idealized influences which create strong moral and ethical values, stimulate loyalty, and foster respect. The second dimension is inspirational motivation which creates a compelling vision for the future and motivates employees’ enthusiasm and self-confidence. The third dimension is intellectual stimulation which creates challenging organizational standards and fosters divergent thinking and innovative procedures. The fourth dimension is individual consideration which creates, acknowledges, and promotes employees’ individual development and advancement.

Transformational leadership dimensions are often used to define the behaviors or characteristics of leaders such as their charisma and to reveal the leader’s ability to accomplish the mission of the organization while instilling pride, respect, and trust within the workforce (Bass, 1990; Hamilton et al., 2009). Oftentimes these types of leaders sacrifice their needs to support their followers because their values, morals, and ethics are indicative of their principles (Bass, 1990; Hamilton et al., 2009). According to Bass (1990) and Hamilton et al. (2009), motivation within organizations is necessary and expected by leaders, as these leaders themselves have the authority necessary to motivate

the workforce to accomplish the mission. Successful leaders use inspirational motivation to demonstrate high expectations that lead to accomplishments through clear and purposeful information (Bass, 1990; Hamilton et al., 2009). “Team spirit is stimulated through outward enthusiasm and optimism for the future of the organization” (Bromley & Kirschner-Bromley, 2007, p. 55). Intellectual stimulation is often viewed as the ability for this leadership dimension to give guidance that will enable the followers the opportunity to be successful at problem solving as they reason through information (Bass, 1990). Bromley and Kirschner-Bromley (2007) defined leaders as people who “seek out new ideas and creative solutions to organizational problems from their followers and encourage new approaches for performing tasks” (p. 55). Individualized consideration is a dimension that describes leaders who “pay attention to the developmental needs of followers and support and coach the development of their followers” (Bass, 1999, p. 11). Bass (1999) discussed how leaders’ ability to delegate provided subordinates the opportunities to grow.

Based on Montano et al. (2017), transformational leadership style is considered effective by researchers. Transformational leaders are often thought to be more successful when promoting leaders within the organization. Transformational leaders tend to be a positive role model for their followers, while teaching them to maintain their emotional balance. For organizations to develop an effective agency, they must first focus on the leaders they place in positions. Sesko and Biernat (2010) revealed how transformational leadership is often considered the ideal leadership style within police agencies. Sesko and Biernat’s survey captured the feedback of 126 police managers from more than 23 states

who attended the 2007-2008 Administrative Officers Course at the Southern Police Institute. The managers were asked to reflect when they were subordinates. This would allow them to select realistic characteristics that they would prefer their leaders to possess. The conclusion of the study revealed that the managers believed that it is important to have leaders who could de-escalate situations, creating a productive environment where these leaders are also visionaries within the agency.

With that said, Sesko and Biernat (2010) discussed how it is imperative for leaders to identify subordinates' roles, responsibilities, and expectations as future leaders of the organization. Therefore, it is necessary for senior leaders to include lessons concerning diversity policies and the importance of an inclusive workforce (Sesko & Biernat, 2010). Sesko and Biernat discovered that unlike male officers, female officers tend to use transformational leadership behavior more than their male counterparts. This style may have developed based on their ability to communicate effectively as a woman who has more experience in balancing work life and family life, "which would allow subordinates freedom of action and would respond well to the followers' concerns" (Sesko & Biernat, 2010, p. 580).

Transactional Leadership Style

Transactional leaders are often viewed as authoritarians who control their workforce through financial means (Bass, 1985; Bono & Judge, 2004). Sesko and Biernat (2010) discussed the behaviors associated with transactional leadership style and how they are different from those associated with transformational leadership style based on the lack of emotions these leaders display. Bass (1985) discussed the four various

dimensions for transactional leadership: contingent reward, management by exception-active, management by exception-passive, and laissez-faire. The contingent reward is based on the leader's behaviors that are focused on the exchange of resources (Bono & Judge, 2004). Leaders provide followers with intangible or tangible resources and support in exchange for their efforts and performance. Management has a responsibility to monitor their subordinates' level of performance to ensure they are meeting the benchmark of performing their job. This is accomplished through exception-activeness pertaining to the leader's ability to take corrective action when it is deemed necessary (Bono & Judge, 2004). If any substandard actions are conducted by the subordinate and documented by management, this will set the standards by focusing on any deviant behaviors (Bono & Judge, 2004). Management by exception-passiveness pertains to leaders taking a passive approach and only intervening when there are serious problems (Bono & Judge, 2004). The final dimension discussed by Bass (1985) is laissez-faire, which has characteristics of the transactional leadership style. However, most times this style focuses on the lack of action from a manager leading to avoidance and the lack of leadership actions (Bono & Judge, 2004).

The transactional leadership style is positioned on how police work is conducted daily (Cockcroft, 2014; Schaveling et al., 2017). The influence of teams was researched, and effective leadership was found to lead to improved team performance (Schaveling et al., 2017). This study also gave recommendations that would show the need for transactional leadership along with a level of charisma that allows leaders the opportunity to communicate with their employees. This would allow the leaders to see their needs and

desires for assignments while accomplishing the mission through policy and procedures to establish a productive and healthy work environment (Schaveling et al., 2017).

Leadership Effectiveness for Senior Federal Law Enforcement Leaders

Law enforcement has always been viewed as a paramilitary organization. Effective leadership leads to a disciplined workforce by ensuring policies and procedures are followed while holding the employees accountable as they demonstrate ethics, values, and morals while performing their jobs. This is why transformational leadership continues to increase within organizations based on the workforce feedback. Researchers have emphasized how law enforcement leaders have implemented this leadership style, allowing officers to express themselves as they create a productive workforce. On the other hand, Pyle and Cangemi (2019) revealed that although transactional leadership is still a part of law enforcement leadership style, it is not as effective when communicating with the workforce or within the community they serve.

There are multiple federal law enforcement agencies. The total number of federal law enforcement agencies within the United States is 65 (Discover Policing, 2018). Each agency has jurisdiction that stems from the mission of the organization. The mission of each federal law enforcement agency leads to the protection and deterrence of all foreign and domestic threats against the United States (FederalLawEnforcement.org, 2020). Nevertheless, the problematic concerns police officers face stem from the failure of their leadership to hold themselves and officers accountable by following policies and procedures. One such failure is the killing of George Floyd, which allowed the public to challenge the comprehensive institutional reform of law enforcement practices which

were not created nor implemented (National Lawyers Guild, 2020; Pyle & Cangemi, 2019; Stamper, 2016). Community-oriented policing, also known as community policing, was a communication strategy created and implemented in the early 1980s to build a bridge between the community and law enforcement officers. This was one of the many pieces of the puzzle to transforming law enforcement policing procedures and partnering with the community (Stamper, 2016). This change was necessary if the police wanted the community to respect them and support them regarding information that would ultimately help solve crimes within these communities (Krimmel & Lindenmuth, 2001). For this relationship to work, the police department would need to take the lead to ensure the community did not see this effort as an artificial initiative, but a process that would stop the senseless killing of the Black and brown people and help solve crimes that plague economically disadvantaged communities. This initiative aimed to build a sound relationship and trust between the public and the police (Krimmel & Lindenmuth, 2001; Ponsaers, 2001; Pyle & Cangemi, 2019). In addition, community-oriented reform does not start with only the police department leaders, but also the politicians who provide the funding that will build up the targeted communities along with initiatives for improvement. These changes are necessary as they aim to build upon a successful community-oriented reform for all parties involved (Ponsaers, 2001; Pyle & Cangemi, 2019).

As law enforcement agencies continue to face many challenges, theoretical studies have shown that transformational leadership is needed for a more efficient agency to ensure the safety of the public and the welfare of the officer (Pyle & Cangemi, 2019).

Vinzant and Crothers (1994) discovered how police officers are viewed as leaders in their community. Similarly, Wood et al. (2008) suggested that officers of all ranks can develop into leaders of change within their communities. Based on all officers having equal consideration to be change agents, Wood et al. noted that the challenge is to create conditions that build this ability from the bottom up. Likewise, Silvestri (2007) reported the need for this type of leadership by highlighting the impact female officers had within the organization and the community they served. In addition, Silvestri noted how police agencies use transactional leadership styles more often than they used transformational leadership styles.

Because society is ever-evolving, law enforcement agencies must make the necessary adjustments to protect their communities. Therefore, the ability to revise law enforcement practices with transformational leadership has begun a shift in many law enforcement organizations. Murphy (2008) and Silvestri (2007) reported how some leaders in law enforcement agencies use transformational leadership practices. When it comes to managing their workforce, many of these leaders still use transactional leadership practices. Literature has revealed how leaders in various organizations have a positive impact on the workforce when they are inclusive of all employees, leading to the increased effectiveness and efficiency of the organization (Pyle & Cangemi, 2019). In addition, police organizations are also compared to a quasi-military model, with the leadership styles in some being labeled as dictatorial. Unfortunately, this type of dictatorship is used in some law enforcement organizations for the fear of losing their officers (Pyle & Cangemi, 2019). Policies and procedures are what determine the failure

and success of any organization, including law enforcement. This is why it is necessary for leaders to implement transformational leadership practices that will build relationships within the organization and the communities they serve. According to Pyle and Cangemi (2019) and Stamper (2016), candidate selections are also based on the implementation of the policies and procedures. These organizational operations are inclusive of promotions and annual training practices which address police behaviors that emphasize the importance of creating and maintaining transformational leadership practices within the organization to support a community-oriented model outside the organization.

Pyle and Cangemi (2019) stated that there is a need for empirical studies to make inquiries of transformational leadership styles and practices that will lead to the improvement of law enforcement behaviors, crime statistics, and community policing. Although law enforcement has been in existence for decades, empirical studies seem to focus on the lower-level organizations in policing such as the local and state organizations instead of the federal government which has a significant impact on society based on federal laws. Warren (n.d.) reported that research on the effectiveness of organizational leadership is falling short at the federal law enforcement level (Sesko & Biernat, 2010; Warren, n.d.). Leadership is effective when the leaders of the organization lead people in a positive manner regardless of the workload or their subordinates' needs and expectations (Sesko & Biernat, 2010). It is imperative that law enforcement leaders understand that their responsibility to the workforce is to provide support, effective

policy, and procedures that will lessen stress and build upon the officer's commitment to lessen employee turnover and inappropriate behavior (Shim et al., 2015).

Law enforcement was considered a great job for the haves and not the have nots. However, through the years, and especially in the 21st century, police officers with seniority find it hard to believe that new officers are not satisfied with the job or the agency in which they work. In addition, to change the perceptions of new officers, leadership will need to engage the workforce to discover what is needed to facilitate high performance among the new officers. This tactic can promote the overall organization's success by enabling them to keep up with the ever-evolving society in which they protect and serve (Warren, n.d.). Law enforcement organizations wrestle with the use of a paramilitary model that often does not align with public demands and the social changes that come with adaptability (Batts et al., 2012).

According to Sesko and Biernat (2010), research concerning law enforcement agencies, their leadership styles, characteristics and practices and community policing has dramatically increased in the last decade. However, there is a lack of effort to study senior federal law enforcement leadership. Warren (n.d.) reported that even with such focus on law enforcement, there is a need for research on senior federal law enforcement leadership in the United States.

The topic of policing is forever at the forefront of society, including their promotional process and who has that advantage based on privilege and legacy. The need to professionalize law enforcement has been a discussion for decades. Leading such significant organizations means ensuring the correct candidates for leadership positions

are selected. This very concern comes with debate on who is the best qualified leader based on educational qualifications, professional experience, and leadership training (Hoggett et al., 2019). Charan et al. (2001) revealed that leaders without field experience contribute to the lack of connection between the workforce and the leader based on the need for shared experiences. This shared experience is gained through entry level policing, building credibility that will be paramount to developing a working relationship between the leader and their followers (Hoggett et al., 2019). The inability to promote leaders with experience often led to a loss of operational knowledge that is acquired through job performance (California Department of Human Resources, 2019; Hoggett et al., 2019). Law enforcement agencies that have leaders who have risen through the ranks are highly respected by the workforce because they have better insight into making prolific change. This is accomplished by having a dialog with their followers that stems from their credibility and mentorship (Hoggett et al., 2019; Wallace & Trinko, 2007). Hoggett et al. (2019) reported that “it is by being able to develop and direct a shared sense of ‘us’ that leaders are able to galvanize individuals’ otherwise idiosyncratic motivations, [therefore controlling] the transformative power of their coordinated energies” (p. 146).

Decker (2018) emphasized the importance of law enforcement agencies accepting inclusive leadership practices and benefits (Fritsvold, 2019). Although federal law enforcement organizations can use transactional leadership styles of management to accomplish the mission, it is more beneficial to incorporate transformational leadership practices to increase morale through engagement and inclusiveness of the workforce

(Decker, 2018; Fritsvold, 2019). As leaders with law enforcement continue to face obstacles, they are aware society is interested in creating more change in their everyday practices. These interests in change stem from politicians, activist groups, and the public reevaluating their practices. Research that evaluates law enforcement leadership strategies and disciplinary concerns at the state, local, and federal levels may provide insight to address these concerns (Noor et al., 2018). Based on the need for changes in law enforcement leadership practices and organization reform, this may allow prolific change that will address the organization's leadership styles, characteristics, and experiences (Hoggett et al., 2019). As these law enforcement institutions carry out their daily mission of protecting and serving society, it is pertinent that their leaders are engaged with police leaders and organizational reform (Haake et al., 2017). This mission can only be reinforced through the direction of administrators, managers, and first line supervisors (Cain, 2017; Noor et al., 2018).

Bishopp et al. (2018) revealed that society viewed law enforcement as one of America's most challenging occupations, a finding which was echoed by El Sayed et al. (2019). However, there are consequences that go with the challenges law enforcement leaders face which stem from leadership practices. These leaders are often ineffective because they abuse their power, causing them to overlook bad conduct and corruption within the organization starting with themselves. Leaders who abuse their authority often perform professional misconduct stemming from acts of corruption and failure to perform their roles and responsibilities. These corrupt leaders lack the ability to perform their

duties because they are not leaders, but someone who is occupying the position without character (Sesko & Biernat, 2010).

In addition, Sesko and Biernat (2010) discussed that ignoring “the ‘dark side’ of leadership is an ironic omission” (p. 737). Studies have demonstrated the lack of effective leaders in organizations is a result of leaders not being held accountable for their bad conduct (Burke, 2006; Kellerman, 2004; Sesko & Biernat, 2010). Similarly, Sesko and Biernat related that if ineffective leadership is not addressed and corrected, their behavior is replicated throughout administrations. Research also discussed the importance of recognizing that the term leadership includes both individuals who are effective, law abiding, and successful at meeting and maintaining the mission; and individuals who are ineffective and corrupt and fail to meet the mission (Kellerman, 2004). Sesko and Biernat (2010) highlighted Kellerman’s (2004) observation relating to the favorable and unfavorable descriptions of leadership and noted that the individuals who hold a position in leadership may not exemplify the standards that leaders should demonstrate in a respectful and successful manner to meet their duties.

African American Women in Federal Law Enforcement Senior Leadership

The barriers that are systemic in nature for African American women have continued to hinder their opportunities for career advancement (Beckwith et al., 2016). Research has revealed that African American women are aware of the systemic challenges they face in obtaining management positions compared to their White female, White male, and African American male counterparts, making them feel like an outsider within the group (Lott, 2009). The United States has been slow to eliminate the

underrepresentation of African American women in senior leadership positions within the federal government workforce. For example, Beckwith et al. (2016) analyzed data from the Department of Health and Human Services to explore the biases, discrimination, and underrepresentation of African American women in senior leadership positions within the corporate arena. The levels of underrepresentation, disparate treatment, and barriers African American women face are comparable to the levels in federal law enforcement and other senior government leadership positions.

However, Natarajan (2008) noted how difficult it is for African American women to not obtain promotions in senior-level positions, not because they were not qualified, but because the individuals in power did not accept them as part of their elite group. Therefore, African American women deal with the challenge of a double disadvantage based on their gender and race; this double-edged sword leads to outcomes of discrimination and biases (Cheeks, 2018). Yu (2018b) discussed the need for work-life balance strategies. If women in law enforcement wish to have a family and be promoted into leadership positions, a supportive work environment is necessary. The strategies that women in law enforcement have discussed in research studies include having flexible work hours, eliminating occupational barriers such as lack of mentorship and promotional opportunities, and eliminating race, age, and social class discrimination.

The demands that women deal with concerning their gender roles and family obligations is a perceived barrier for some women (Yu, 2018b). This barrier has effects such as a lack of promotional opportunities and the continuous challenges between balancing work and family obligations (Groysberg & Connolly, 2013; Schulz, 2009;

Schwanke, 2013; Yu, 2018b). To mitigate this barrier, it is necessary for organizational leaders to implement policy, procedures, and annual leadership training that will address these concerns (African American Policy Forum, n.d.). This barrier is often based on an individual's unconscious biases derived from societal norms. Although this systemic barrier impacts all women in law enforcement, the challenges faced by White women and Black women can differ considerably (Griffith, 2014). Diversity is not represented within law enforcement agencies based on tradition, supported by a male-dominant leadership culture (Smith et al., 2005) which cultivates a level of marginalization for African American women in leadership positions. Even today, research has discussed how the strength of multiculturalism concerning the individual and organizations can bring value (Brown & Bear, 2012) to the work environment.

The U.S. Office of Personnel Management's (2016) report on fiscal year 2016 showed approximately 80% of the SES population in the federal government was White men and White women and 11% were African Americans, which means the number is even lower for African American women. Despite the various research studies conducted by scholars, organizations, and governments, the issue that African American women are underrepresented in senior leadership positions, especially in male-dominant occupations, exists today (Catalyst, 2002).

Following the 1972 passage of the Equal Employment Opportunity Act, most studies on women in law enforcement have focused on female officers working in local or state law enforcement (Hill et al., 2022; Rushin, 2021; Yu, 2015b). However, there are differences between federal law enforcement and local and state law enforcement

agencies (Yu, 2018a, 2018b). Research focusing on female federal law enforcement officers is sparse (Barratt et al., 2011; Carter, 2021; Schulz, 2009; Yu, 2015b, 2018a, 2018b, 2023). Moreover, there is a gap in the literature regarding African American women who are senior leaders in federal law enforcement.

The U.S. Office of Personnel Management (2016) created the SES Candidate Program, a diversity training program that assists agencies in recruiting qualified future senior leaders. Adesaogun et al. (2015) identified themes regarding how African American women achieved senior leadership positions. The first theme was being present; this meant volunteering for opportunities that would elevate their knowledge and skills through advance training and/or relocating to other locations, mostly in areas where African Americans did not prominently live. The second theme was to invest in their education, understanding that minorities must have a higher level of education to be considered qualified among their White male and female counterparts within their career field.

Qu and Dumay (2011) examined African American women who worked in South Carolina police departments to focus on the underrepresentation of African American women in leadership positions and the challenges they faced when advancing in their careers. The study used semi-structured interviews to gather the lived experiences of these women to gain knowledge of the barriers they faced to advancing into leadership positions in law enforcement. Research findings indicated that compared with Caucasian Americans and other racial minorities, African American police officers preferred a transformational leadership style that is described as “a structured task-centered

leadership orientation” (p. 580). For example, Sesko and Biernat (2010) reported that African American Police Chief Burtell Jefferson of Washington, D.C., was known to use an inclusive leadership style as well as mentoring. Oftentimes men in leadership positions are known to be assertive and dominant in nature while women tend to display nurturing and kind leadership fundamentals toward their personnel (Sabharwal, 2015).

African American women in law enforcement leadership positions endured far more preconceptions and biases throughout their tenure than any other race or gender (Brown & Bear, 2012). According to Gurman (2018), African American women are the most oppressed group within law enforcement. Howard-Hamilton (2003) discussed how people respond differently in certain occupations based on life experiences. These findings have led to more research regarding why African American women experience discrimination within leadership positions. As expressed by Knight et al. (2003), although African American women are qualified to gain entry-level positions in the workforce, they are not considered qualified for leadership positions.

Law enforcement was an organization that was created for men and although decades have passed, the mindset has not. Women understand these inequalities and have created strategies such as work-life balance resources to gain acceptance in law enforcement and law enforcement leadership positions; they can remain quiet if they want to be promoted into senior leadership or possess male qualities to be accepted into this male-dominant society (Adams & Demaiter, 2009). Women who aspire to be in leadership positions are often told they cannot both have a family and have a career in leadership (Sesko & Biernat, 2010). Despite the challenges African American women

have endured from the beginning of their existence in America, from slavery to legalized segregation and today's systemic racism (Gómez, 2015), they have continued to endure these shameful experiences in law enforcement. These women persist and are promoted within leadership roles, even though they are not perceived to be intellectuals. Despite everything, they work hard to demonstrate their ability to be leaders and promote within senior leadership positions (McLeod, n.d.).

Satisfaction of African American Women as Senior Leaders in Federal Law Enforcement

Regardless of the sparse level of research conducted on African American women's lived experiences in senior federal law enforcement positions, there are several empirical studies that discovered organizational barriers that limit African American women from advancing into senior and executive leadership roles within various organizations (Matthies et al., 2016). Although African American women have defined strategies like being present and willing to relocate wherever needed, creating a level of consistency by being promoted through the ranks and gaining a higher level of education to overcome being underrepresented, they are still not accepted as peers or qualified enough to become a senior leader without unfair treatment or overcoming organizational and social biases. According to Bachman (2017), African American women receive little to no support from management and are therefore less likely to be promoted. Therefore, it is imperative to research the lived experiences of African American women (Babers, 2016).

Research continuously shows how women in leadership positions are underrepresented in senior management positions; however, these studies group women together as a collective (Catalyst, 1999, 2002). African American women are disregarded and appear invisible while their worth is overlooked (Gamble & Turner, 2015). The concrete ceiling may be ambiguous, but its effects are not. Theories of the concrete ceiling showed how the double disadvantages of gender and race lead to adverse actions against African American women because of the discrimination they bear (Cheeks, 2018). As discussed in Griffith and Montrosse-Moorhead (2014), the challenges that White women deal with differ immensely from those of Black women. Catalyst (2004) and Schulz (2009) discussed how the challenges are even more prominent for Black women who seek or have gained advancement into senior and executive leadership positions. Beckwith et al. (2016) discovered how African American women's representation is the lowest within leadership positions throughout the United States.

According to Franks (1994), African American women's leadership style is often defined as transformational rather than transactional. Franks discussed that African American women's ability to gain additional workforce knowledge may allow them to hold senior level positions. This skill can be gained by their being present and attaining a higher level of education to compete against their White peers; this may in turn render them overqualified for the position. There is minimal literature that relates to African American women in senior leadership positions in law enforcement; thus, additional research is needed to benefit leaders and researchers for the advancement and success of law enforcement organizations (Path, 2019). Although law enforcement has been a part

of our society since the beginning, there is limited research on certain aspects such as the challenges that plague this organization. Race and gender are the most common workplace challenges that law enforcement agencies focus on, which presents additional difficulties as White men are the individuals who most often examine and address the concerns of the workforce (Yu, 2020a). African American women have been ignored in many research studies because they are grouped with multiracial feminism when discussing their lived experiences and occupational barriers (Yu, 2020a). White women's perceptions of the barriers mainly extend to the glass ceiling effect, while African American women's work experiences are considerably different, as they include underrepresentation, discrimination, disparate treatment, and organizational systemic barriers. Yu (2020a) recognized that the views stem predominantly from White men who are the leaders in law enforcement organizations because of their White privilege. The fact that African American women are different and treated differently from their White male, White female, and non-White male colleagues is irrefutable (Yu, 2020a). Qualitative studies have recognized the perceptions of African American women based on their life experience in law enforcement and society regarding the barriers they face daily (Columbia Law School, 2017; Maxwell, 2013).

Summary and Conclusions

This chapter provided an overview of African American women in federal law enforcement. The intersectionality theory, Black feminist thought theory, and the glass ceiling theory were used to examine African American women's career advancement as senior leaders in federal law enforcement. Research is sparse at the federal law

enforcement level that focused on African American women's lived experiences in senior leadership positions.

Chapter 2 included the introduction, literature search strategy, a discussion of the conceptual framework, and a literature review. The literature review discussed how at the state and local law enforcement levels, researchers have extensively investigated leadership styles and discipline problems among police officers (Noor et al., 2018), police leadership challenges (Hoggett et al., 2019), and police leaders and organization reform (Haake et al., 2017). However, research at the federal law enforcement level is lacking regarding how leaders' characteristics and styles contribute to effective organizational leadership (El Sayed et al., 2019). Both transformational and transactional leadership styles have been noted as effective in law enforcement (Bono & Judge, 2004; Russell, 2017).

The literature review revealed that there was little research that examined the developmental resources needed to prepare and support African American women in senior leadership in federal law enforcement organizations. African American women are underrepresented in senior leadership positions in federal law enforcement, and they deserve to have their voices heard. The discovery of selected research studies reveals there is a need for enhanced knowledge about the lived experiences of African American women in federal law enforcement. Although federal law enforcement has a diverse workforce, its leadership is dominated by White men. Chapter 3 includes the introduction, research design and rationale, role of the researcher, selected methodology, issues of trustworthiness, ethical procedures, and a summary.

Chapter 3: Research Method

This qualitative study provided additional literature to the field of criminal justice by exploring the lived experiences of 14 African American women in senior leadership positions within federal law enforcement agencies. The main purpose of this study was to analyze and gain an understanding of how African American women in senior leadership positions within federal law enforcement agencies dealt with significant underrepresentation and occupational barriers. This included examining their lived experiences regarding the interpersonal skills they used to overcome the barriers they encountered while pursuing senior leadership positions.

The qualitative method enabled the exploration of the participants' lived experiences (Creswell, 2014). As qualitative research often discovers the problem where literature is lacking, it is imperative to explore the participants' experiences to gain a valuable understanding of the study (Moustakas, 1994). Conversely, the quantitative method is used to test hypotheses gained through measured variables. This would not have been the best method to discover findings for this phenomenological study which was conducted through the lens of existential thinking.

Research Questions

This qualitative research study addressed one central research question and two subquestions based on the lived experiences of African American women within senior leadership positions in federal law enforcement. The central research question guiding the study was as follows: What are the perceptions of senior African American women

leaders in federal law enforcement about their lived experiences as they progressed to their current position?

The two subquestions were the following:

1. What meanings emerge from the lived experiences of African American women who retired or are currently holding senior leadership positions in federal law enforcement as they navigate the complexities of intersectionality within their careers?
2. How do the lived experiences of African American women who retired or are currently in senior leadership roles within federal law enforcement shape their strategies and decisions?

These research questions were used to discover how intersectionality, Black feminist thought, and the glass ceiling theory impact the career progression of African American women within senior leadership positions within federal law enforcement agencies. Qualitative research is the method used by researchers to explore human problems within a society that allows for a better understanding of the affected individuals (Creswell, 2014; Sesko & Biernat, 2010). This approach reveals how the individuals' experiences allowed them to process societal norms, giving them a better understanding of how to cope with such judgments (Yin, 2016). These two questions allowed for the examination of African American women's interactions in the workplace and how they react to various judgments of their professional lived experiences. These experiences shaped their leadership capabilities throughout their interactions within the federal law enforcement workplace. The purpose of this chapter is to identify the

methodology needed to explore the lived experiences of African American women's career advancement within senior leadership (GS-15 and SES) positions in federal law enforcement. In this chapter, I discuss the research design and rationale, the role of researcher, methodology, issues of trustworthiness, and ethical procedures.

Research Design and Rationale

Research Design

To best gain the lived experiences of the participants, face-to-face interviews were conducted to capture the in-depth responses. The qualitative approach provided the participants with an avenue to give voice to their stories of their leadership experiences in federal law enforcement. The study design centered on intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989), Black feminist thought (Collins, 1986), and the glass ceiling theory (Collins, 1986) as a framework that contributed to the career advancement of African American women leaders into GS-15 (pay grade based on rank) and senior leadership positions in federal law enforcement agencies. The qualitative research design was used to determine how intersectionality, Black feminist thought, and the glass ceiling theory influenced the career advancement of African American women in senior leadership positions within federal law enforcement agencies. This qualitative phenomenological design allowed me to collect data from each participant in a two-part interview process.

Moustakas (1994) discussed how the researcher of a study should be inclusive of their own experience as they seek to understand the participants' lived experience. African American women who managed to obtain positions in senior leadership positions within federal law enforcement agencies understand the quantitative findings based on

their levels of underrepresentation within law enforcement and even more so in senior leadership positions (Salmons, 2017).

Rationale

Qualitative research entails gaining in-depth insight into people's lived experiences, issues, or concerns (Creswell, 2014). This phenomenological approach allowed me to understand the lived experiences and not have assumptions regarding what the participants' responses may be to the interview questions (Moustakas, 1994). Gaining knowledge through qualitative research is necessary to capture an understanding of what causes the study group's underrepresentation and occupational barriers (Creswell, 2014). Smith et al. (2005) discussed how historical research reinforced harmful stereotypes toward marginalized groups, like African American communities. Therefore, I needed to identify and understand the gap in the research while understanding that what takes place within the organization may differ from the research questions and how the participants respond. A researcher also needs to understand the importance of making a good impression on the interviewees to gain more participants for the study (Hamilton, 2020).

Cohen and Huffman (2007) discussed the importance of women advancing in the workforce and the biases they face even when they are successful at advancing in senior level positions. As women identify these strategies, organizations need to address these recognized biases, social norms, and stereotypes to implement comprehensive approaches regarding promoting women throughout leadership. I gained comprehensive insight about populations (see Mertens, 2014), which allowed for more in-depth interviews and helped minimize assumptions that could negatively impact the study. This phenomenology study

allowed me to discover findings without preconceived notions about the phenomenon (Gamble & Turner, 2015).

Role of the Researcher

As the researcher, I am responsible for several roles in conducting this research study. The researcher is involved in every aspect of the study, from defining the design, to all phases of conducting the research study (Sanjari et al., 2014). As a qualitative researcher, I served as an overseer, contributor, and participant in the process. Creswell (2014) revealed how the researcher works as an instrument of study through research questions and chosen methodology. I requested participation through various means of communication such as face-to-face conversations, emails, and telephone conversations. Interviews were conducted through Zoom video calls which were audibly recorded. As the researcher, I conducted in-depth semistructured interviews about the lived experiences of African American women in senior leadership positions and their lived experiences within federal law enforcement agencies. The probing questions guided the discussion and allowed participants to explore their experiences through the lens of intersectionality, Black feminist thought, and glass ceiling theory. The study employed data analysis techniques involving transforming raw data by analyzing, synthesizing, and interpreting the data that are accurate and placed in categories based on the relationships within the study (Maxwell, 2013).

I used Delve, a qualitative data analysis software, to manage and analyze all data using Moustakas's (1994) modified van Kaam method of analysis. I conducted semistructured interviews and transcribed the interviews verbatim to capture the

participants' lived experiences (Creswell, 2014; Sesko & Biernat, 2010). The interview questions allowed participants the opportunity to identify biases so federal law enforcement agencies can better address this group's underrepresentation, barriers, and disparate treatment through the development of policies and procedures, leadership diversity and inclusion courses, succession planning, and mentoring programs. Sanjari et al. (2014) revealed that capturing lived experiences through documentation of statements results in a completed phenomenological qualitative study. These approaches may influence and enhance the representation of African American women in federal law enforcement through their lived experiences and provide a pathway to address the inequalities as they progressed to their current position. As a researcher and an African American woman who has worked in a senior leadership position, I may have had similar experiences as the participants in this study.

Because the human element in research may influence the findings of the study, to ensure that I remained aware of my own biases, I used measures that would inhibit me from interjecting or making assumptions about the participants' responses. As the researcher, any assumptions that I presume to be true may be temporary or for a specific purpose to create an opinion (Vogt & Johnson, 2016). Assuming that all responses are true, I am grateful for their participation as I gained knowledge of their experiences.

Next, I took field notes that allowed me to annotate detailed information of the participants' feelings and perception that may impact the study. Then, I gathered information that was newly introduced from the interviews that would be helpful in exploring the participants' responses. Lastly, as the researcher, I informed the participants

that I would capture their truth without providing any motive to eliminate the perception of coercion. This allowed me to protect the participants as senior leaders working within federal law enforcement positions who are subjected to ethical oversight. As the researcher, I protected the participants' identity to ensure confidentiality (Slembrouck, 2015). Goulding (2005) argued that the study journal, field notes, and member checking mitigated the researcher's biases to focus on the lived experiences of the participants. This process was needed to gain in-depth information and enabled the researcher to address any questions or concerns about the analyzed data later.

Methodology

The methodological approach for this qualitative study was an interpretative phenomenological research study design. The research explored the lived experiences of the participants from their perspective, divorced from the researcher's biases and assumptions. The findings regarding the prejudices, organizational barriers, and social stereotypes the participants experienced as senior leaders in federal law enforcement positions revealed strategies that executives in management can use to address those barriers. This method allowed the study to give the participants a voice for discussing the barriers they faced throughout their careers as senior leaders within federal law enforcement agencies.

Participant Selection Logic

The population of this phenomenological study, African American women who have retired from or currently work in senior leadership positions, was selected based on the limited research and the number of African American women in senior leadership

positions within federal law enforcement agencies. The sample is composed of African American women who hold or have held a position in senior leadership within federal law enforcement. The targeted population has a common interest and characteristics that are necessary for the study (Palinkas et al., 2015). As a qualitative study, the sample size should be large enough that an answer pattern is formed based on the participants' responses (Morse, 2015). The study may reach data saturation when the participants have similar information and no new or additional information is collected (Saunders et al., 2017). The sample size was 14. Once data saturation was attained, the research was considered adequate.

Instrumentation

In this study, I collected data and identified themes using in-depth semistructured interviews. The qualitative instrument contained comprehensive interview questions that provoked thorough responses. I developed an instrument consisting of 11 semistructured open-ended questions used to capture the participants' stories (see Appendix A). During the interviews, I took field notes to establish how I identified with the details of the information (Creswell & Guetterman, 2018). I captured in-depth data by using probing questions, while observing nonverbal expressions gave clarity to the participants' responses. This method allowed the process to be effective by asking probing questions to gain a complete thought process of their vision. By allowing the participants to tell their own stories, this study provided a better understanding of the challenges faced by African American women in senior leadership roles in federal law enforcement positions. The interview guide allowed for relevant, clear, and valid information based on Goodly's

modified instrument. The feedback collected from the questionnaire allowed the participants to give informative responses, making it clear that no pilot study was necessary for this research.

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

Procedures for Recruitment

The targeted group for this research were women who self-identified as African American senior leaders in federal law enforcement agencies. The participants held positions in senior leadership within both headquarters and field office locations in federal law enforcement agencies across the United States. This leadership level included GS-15 or higher and SES positions within federal law enforcement in the United States. The recruitment of the population is the focus on African American women who retired or currently work in senior leadership positions within federal law enforcement agencies across the United States.

Participation

The participants of this study were solicited from an enclosed invitation through social media using the PhD Women's Network. The invitation letter requested that volunteers contact me by email or phone if they wished to participate in the study. All participants were African American women employees whose general schedule and pay scale was GS-15 or SES. The participants were employed by several federal law enforcement agencies within the Department of Justice, Department of Homeland Security, Department of Housing and Urban Development, and Department of the Interior. The population of the study was recruited from known federal law enforcement

agencies. This phenomenological study worked with participants that may help to increase diversity and inclusion throughout federal law enforcement agencies (Brooks, 2019).

Data Collection

The data were collected through an interview process with 14 participants. Creswell (2014) recommended allocating a set time for each interview, allowing the researcher the opportunity to gain a depth of knowledge and information concerning the participants' lived experiences. Each interview lasted for a period of 1–2 hours or until the participant had no new information to provide. This phenomenological study laid out the lived experiences of African American women who are underrepresented and face barriers, creating a theory (Smith et al., 2005) as to why this group has low representation among senior leaders compared to ethnic groups or men in federal law enforcement agencies. Semistructured interviews allowed the participants the opportunity to recount their experiences, feelings, and beliefs while the researcher captures the details of their stories (Creswell, 2014; Sesko & Biernat, 2010). A level of informality and a conversational approach to the interview allowed me to become engaged with the participant using additional interview questions (see Appendix A) to support the central research question. Another process I used in this study was snowball sampling, which was exhausted until the sample size was reached or until the participant pool was identified (Alase, 2017).

Data Analysis Plan

I employed data analysis techniques that involved transforming raw data by analyzing, synthesizing, and interpreting that data to ensure accuracy and reliability (Maxwell, 2013). I conducted semistructured interviews and transcribed the interviews verbatim (Creswell, 2014; Sesko & Biernat, 2010). Once the interviews were completed, I used Delve to manage and analyze all data. The interview questions allowed the participants to discuss and thereby facilitate a deeper understanding of their lived experiences. Gathering a range of perspectives and insights from different individuals may enable federal law enforcement agencies to better address the participants' underrepresentation. These biases, barriers, and levels of disparate treatment can be addressed through the development of policies and procedures such as leadership diversity and inclusion courses, succession planning, and mentoring programs. These approaches may influence and enhance the representation of African American women in federal law enforcement. This plan may provide a pathway to address the inequalities as they progressed within their current position.

I used Moustakas's (1994) modified van Kaam method to analyze the data, which included the following steps: listing and preliminary grouping, reduction and elimination, clustering, and thematizing the invariant constituents. These steps lead to the final identification of invariant constituents and themes collected through the proper applications. The relevant, validated invariant constituents, and themes are constructed for the researcher based on the individual textual description of the experience. The van Kaam method is based on analyzed data while the regular Moustakas method is based on

the researcher's analysis of the data collected through summarized themes based on the phenomenon under study.

According to Moustakas (1994), the construct for the researcher's study is based on an individual structural description of the experience stemming from an individual textural description and an imaginative variation. The construct for each research participant is based on a textural–structural description, which allows the researcher to gain the meanings and essences of each experience to represent the group. Renz et al. (2018) and Zhang and Wildemuth (2009) suggested that data analysis allowed the researcher to gather and describe the information in a systematic approach through written representation. Therefore, understanding how phenomenological studies capture the essence of the participants' experience allowed me to define themes and statements in a clear and concise manner.

Coding Process

A qualitative study does not require a large sample size to reach adequate research results (Creswell, 2014). The interviewing process of 14 participants used in this interpretative phenomenological study raised a question or concern of limitation to this study. However, the small sample size approach of at least 13 participants was recommended to reach data saturation (Clarke & Braun, 2013; Fugard & Potts, 2015; Guest et al., 2006). I conducted one-on-one interviews to gain a better understanding of each participants lived experiences as African American women in senior leadership positions in federal law enforcement. The interview process produced data through digital recordings, face to face and field notes were conducted through the interview process.

Transcriptions of each interview were imported in the Delve software to identify, manage, and analyze all data through codes, themes, and subthemes. Researchers use qualitative research to explore human issues or concerns within society; therefore, the coding process was used to identify data, themes and subthemes includes biases that impact opportunity, contest competence, limit mentorship, and underrepresentation. This research used the approach that relates to generalization and concluded the framework from the beginning to the end. Coding refers to analysis of labeling and categorizing groups. The Delve software managed and analyzed all data using Moustakas's (1994) modified van Kaam method. The participants in this study had the opportunity to provide their lived experiences by providing relevant details though the use of qualitative research questions.

Coding Strategy

This study's coding strategy started with developing descriptive patterns and themes from in-depth interviews (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). The second step was discovering codes that would identify recurrent verbiage from the transcripts related to leadership characteristics and the underrepresentation of African American women. The third step of coding involved constant themes, groupings, and summaries leading to the final analysis. The fourth step was downloading the data from Delve into an Excel spreadsheet. At this stage, I reviewed all the codes and matched them with corresponding transcripts. The fifth step was grouping the transcripts and codes into themes. This was the step in which the essence of the phenomenon was developed. This allows final codes to align with the data represented in the themes. The researcher is then able to extract the

qualitative findings from the data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The final step allowed the data to address the research questions while reflecting the participants' narratives (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The themes and subthemes reflected how race and gender affected the career advancement of African American women in senior leadership positions within federal law enforcement agencies.

Issues of Trustworthiness

Credibility

Credibility is the internal validity element that facilitates trustworthiness in qualitative research (Connelly, 2016). This level of trust ensures the confidentiality needed to establish the truth and facts of the study. Internal validity is the most important type of research validity (Parker, 1993). Threats to internal validity include history, maturation, testing, instrumentation, statistical regression, selection, mortality, interactions with selection, and ambiguity about the direction of causal influence (Parker, 1993). Member checking is when the participants receive the transcripts from the researcher to review the document. This is another technique I used to ensure accuracy of the participants' responses concerning their lived experiences. In addition, I assumed that participants were attentive, open, and honest when completing their interview.

Transferability

A full description of the research methods was used to ensure the transferability of the data. I listened closely to the lived experiences of each participant while ensuring each story was captured in a manner that all readers will be able to understand.

Amankwaa (2016) discussed the importance of providing a detailed description of the

data, as the findings allow the reader to understand the transferable contexts from one individual's experience to another. By ensuring transferability, I allowed the interview process to capture clear and credible details of the participants' stories (Connolly, 2016). Providing a detailed depiction of the study allows other phenomenological studies to verify the generalizability and validity of this research.

Dependability

Dependability reflected the factual, consistent, and reliable nature of the data. The qualitative research captured audit sequences, clusters, codes, emergent themes, and triangulation to show patterns from other research studies (Brancu, 2018; Yu, 2020a). This study analyzed data captured from in-depth interviews through Delve, which identified codes, themes, and subthemes.

Confirmability

Confirmability is often referred to as "the neutrality of the researcher." The qualitative data are validated when the data are analyzed and resemble a clear pattern (Amankwaa, 2016). The participants' experiences reflected their true lived experiences and not any biases or interests of the researcher. The appropriate strategies to establish confirmability included using direct quotes from participants to capture their perspective and identify themes within the study (Cope, 2014).

Ethical Procedures

All study participants had privacy throughout the process. The study was conducted based on the Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB) guidelines. Walden's IRB guidelines ensured the ethical treatment of participants was reviewed and

approved prior to the study being conducted. As an African American woman and retired federal law enforcement senior leader, I performed the study with integrity while remaining unbiased. Participants were informed of their confidentiality and that the study was voluntary. They were allowed to discontinue the process at any time. The consent form provided my contact information, my chair's contact information, and the Walden University IRB Chair's contact information; this enabled participants to talk privately about their rights as a participant. All documents, including analyzed data from the interviews, will be maintained in a secured digital archive and printed documents will be secured in a locked file cabinet in a safe location in my home.

As an African American woman who retired after working as a senior leader of a federal law enforcement agency, I was aware of and took steps to address any biases concerning the study. To address any biases, I bracketed any emotional state concerning personal experiences (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). Bracketing is a research technique that allows the researcher to "set aside any personal belief, values and experiences in order to understand the phenomenon from the participant's perspective" (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019, p. 221). Addressing any negative work experiences before the study helped to ensure that I was fully dedicated to capturing the participants' lived experiences regardless of class (Taylor et al., 2015). Once I completed the Walden IRB application to move forward in the process, I requested email consent from the participants. After the IRB approved the application, I followed all processes and procedures to collect data and safeguard the research data according to Walden University IRB guidelines.

Summary

The purpose of Chapter 3 was to capture the methodology of this qualitative phenomenological research through the research design and instrument used to develop the study. The research design was used to gain data and give a voice to African American women in senior leadership positions within federal law enforcement. This study explored the lived experiences of these women who faced organizational barriers throughout their career advancement within senior leadership positions in federal law enforcement agencies. The data collected from the interviews were transcribed to develop the themes within the study.

Maxwell (2013) discussed the research design and the approaches needed to strategize and identify relationships and the components of the study. Once data collection was completed, the interviews were transcribed in detail to capture the unique experiences of the participants' lived experiences of African American women who retired from senior leadership positions in federal law enforcement agencies or African American women who are currently working in senior leadership positions. The challenges these women have encountered during their senior leadership career positions will help add to research through this phenomenological study. Chapter 4 provides the analysis and findings of the study.

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of African American women in senior leadership positions in federal law enforcement agencies in the United States. The conceptual framework for this research included intersectionality theory, Black feminist thought theory, and the glass ceiling theory. I

explored the lived experiences of African American women who retired from or are currently working in senior leadership positions in federal law enforcement agencies. This leadership level includes general schedule pay scale GS-15 or SES positions within federal law enforcement. The primary research question was: What are the perceptions of senior African American women leaders in federal law enforcement about their lived experiences as they progressed to their current position?

Two subquestions were as follows:

1. What meanings emerge from the lived experiences of African American women who retired or are currently holding senior leadership positions in federal law enforcement as they navigate the complexities of intersectionality within their careers?
2. How do the lived experiences of African American women who retired or are currently in senior leadership roles within federal law enforcement shape their strategies and decisions?

This chapter addressed the research procedures, participation, data collection, and data analysis. All of the revealed information was based on the trustworthiness, credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability, and ethical procedures of the study.

Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this interpretative phenomenological research study was to explore the lived experiences of African American women career advancement within senior leadership in federal law enforcement who are retired or currently work in senior leadership roles. The study design focused on intersectionality theory, Black feminist thought theory, and the glass ceiling theory. The study delved into the challenges faced by African American women in senior leadership positions (e.g., GS-15 and SES) within the federal law enforcement agencies. The following central research question was used to guide this study: What are the perceptions of senior African American women leaders in federal law enforcement about their lived experiences as they progressed to their current position? Two subquestions were as follows:

1. What meanings emerge from the lived experiences of African American women who retired or are currently holding senior leadership positions in federal law enforcement as they navigate the complexities of intersectionality within their careers?
2. How do the lived experiences of African American women who retired or are currently in senior leadership roles within federal law enforcement shape their strategies and decisions?

In this chapter, I reiterate the purpose of the study and research questions to include information involving the data collection and study results. All of the revealed information was based on the data collected and analyzed for trustworthiness, credibility,

transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Ethical procedures were followed in the gathering of data. This chapter also presents the research results and a summary.

Research Setting

Throughout the study, there were no personal or professional conditions that influenced the participation of the participants or the interpretation of the study in a negative way. No budget cuts impacted the participants; therefore, their ability to participate in the study as a volunteer in a private and safe environment was conducted in such a manner.

A total of 14 African American women in senior leadership roles (e.g., GS-15 or SES) agreed to participate in the study. All 14 interviews were conducted via Zoom teleconference where the participants were comfortable in their home or a private location without any disturbance. I maintained control of their confidentiality in my home office with the doors closed without any distractions or interruptions.

Demographics

In order to participate in this interpretative phenomenological study, the guidelines for the criteria required that participants be African American women who were retired or currently working in senior leadership roles in federal law enforcement whose general schedule and pay scale were GS-15 or SES level. The participants were employed by several federal law enforcement agencies. Each agreed to participate based on the recruitment invitation email.

The participants held past and present positions from senior advisor, director, deputy director, special agent in charge, and assistant special agent in charge. These

African American women of senior leadership displayed stellar leadership characteristics and provided exceptional leadership guidance to their respective workforce as the ultimate attribute of a phenomenal woman. The participants were all located in the United States where they performed their duties in the United States and in other countries based on their assignments. Each participant was college educated, holding either a bachelor's, master's, or doctoral degree. The remaining demographic information is included in Table 1. Participants were identified as Participant 1 (P1) through Participant 14 (P14).

Table 1

Study Participants' Demographics

Participants	Age of participants	Highest leadership level	Years it took to get into senior leadership
P1	40–60	GS-15	14
P2	40–60	GS-15	14
P3	40–60	GS-15	16
P4	40–60	SES	12
P5	40–60	GS-15	14
P6	Over 60	GS-15	13
P7	Over 60	GS-15	10
P8	Over 60	SES	13
P9	40–60	GS-15	19
P10	40–60	SES	17
P11	40–60	GS-15	18
P12	Over 60	SES	20
P13	Over 60	SES	15
P14	Over 60	SES	24

Data Collection

There were no variations during data collection, and no discrepancies were noted throughout the process. After receiving approval from the Walden University IRB (Approval No. 02-05-24-0132692), I emailed my potential participants recruitment

invitations and the consent form to recruit through purposeful sampling, snowball sampling, or until saturation was identified.

Once the participant responded to my Walden's student email address with "I consent" to participate in the study, I replied to arrange the date and time for their interview to provide them with their Zoom meeting link. Data collection took place from February 9, 2024, through March 01, 2024, most of the participants were interviewed on different days. The Zoom interviews took an average of 1 to 2 hours. Once the interview began, I reiterated how the interview guide focused on the purpose of the study in which they received an introduction of the study within the consent form. Throughout the interview, which was conducted via auto recording and transcribed through Zoom, I maintained field notes and annotated detailed information of the participants' feelings and perceptions that may impact the study as I ensured them that their data, identity, and information was kept confidential.

In order to maintain confidentiality all participants' identities were coded as Participant 1 (P1) through Participant 14 (P14). At the end of each interview, I explained to each participant the process of the member checking. I informed them that I would be sending an unedited transcript to view the researcher's interpretation of their response that was transcribed via audio recording. I had 14 participants in the study, who were retired or currently working in senior leadership roles in federal law enforcement whose general schedule and pay scale were GS-15 or SES level. Once the transcript was received, they could make corrections via email, if needed. Four participants responded via email to provide additional information and added clarity to their responses.

Data Analysis

The data were downloaded electronically through Zoom transcripts, and the themes were derived using Moustakas's (1994) modification of the van Kaam method in connection with the Delve tool software based on 14 participants. The assumptions revealed in the data are based on the research questions. Responses to the interview questions helped to address the research questions regarding the lived experiences of African American women within senior leadership positions in federal law enforcement.

A qualitative study does not require a large sample size to reach adequate research results (Creswell, 2014). The interviewing process of 14 participants used in this interpretative phenomenological study raised a question or concern of limitation to this study. However, the small sample size approach of at least 13 participants was recommended to reach data saturation (Clarke & Braun, 2013; Fugard & Potts, 2015; Guest et al., 2006). The one-on-one interviews were conducted to gain a better understanding of each participants lived experiences as African American women in senior leadership positions in federal law enforcement. The interview process produced data through digital recordings; face to face and field notes were conducted through the interview process. Transcriptions of each interview were imported in the Delve software identified, managed, and analyzed all data through codes, themes, and subthemes. This qualitative research was used to explore human issues or concerns within society; therefore, the coding process used to identify data, themes, and subthemes includes biases that impact opportunities, contest competences, limited mentorship, and the underrepresentation of African American women. This research used a qualitative

approach that included three frameworks. Each coding referred to the data analysis of labeling and categorizing groups. The Delve software managed and analyzed all data using Moustakas's (1994) modified van Kaam method. Therefore, the participants in this study had the opportunity to provide their lived experiences by providing relevant detailed information using qualitative research questions.

Theme 1: Mental and Spiritual Welfare

The first theme correlated to the perceptions about the participants' lived experiences as they progressed to their current positions based on the central research question: What are the perceptions of senior African American women leaders in federal law enforcement about their lived experiences as they progressed to their current position? The theme was discussed by most of the participants, and subthemes also emerged: (a) self-confidence, (b) leveraging relationships, and (c) training opportunities. Their spirituality gave them self-confidence, which allowed them to leverage relationships both internally and externally and lastly, they used every training opportunity to gain the knowledge needed to even be considered for career advancement. As each participant experienced similar challenges and senior career advancement barriers, they discussed how they used their strength from God (spirituality), self-confidence and effective communication to leverage their relationships. This stems from embracing training opportunities to creating supportive communities around them consisting of mentors, peers, and a network of supportive leaders. The participants responded about their religious beliefs, self-confidence, and taking advantage of training opportunities in order to compete with their counterparts. For example, P4 stated,

I am a firm believer that God is in control; God does all things. Sooner or later, I got to the point, I was like it is what it is, y'all mad, since y'all are already mad with me, I might as well go and say what I have to say. So, as a woman who worked in traditional law enforcement, and they were not sure that a woman could handle it, I would come up with an operations (ops) plan and allow them to deal with what they needed to deal with, because I got a badge and gun just like you. Moving forward, they understood I knew my job.

P5 stated, "As I went through the course of my career, having courage, having integrity, learning my job, being a good steward of my job, and sometimes, things are about timing and opportunities." P1 stated, "It was really taking advantage of different opportunities that came and most of those opportunities weren't opportunities that were given to me or put in front of me. They were opportunities that I sought out and found." P12 stated,

If there is an opportunity available to you, seek out someone who has taken advantage of that opportunity and find out how they were able to achieve it. And then you're going to go and do whatever they tell you and some. Because, again, their role is going to be a little bit different from yours because you are Black, and you are an African American female and the expectation for you is not going to be the same as the expectation for that person who does not look like you.

P10 stated,

Keep focused, you keep working hard, you remain, you follow the rules, you understand what the rules are, and you remain professional. No one's going to

take your integrity. They may try, but if you're living within those boundaries or those parameters, they can't take it away from you.

Theme 2: Stagnation of African American Senior Female Leaders

The second theme correlated to the first research subquestion: What meanings emerge from the lived experiences of African American women who retired or currently holding senior leadership positions in federal law enforcement as they navigate the complexities of intersectionality within their careers? These themes were discussed by most of the participants. The analysis of their responses also revealed subthemes: (a) Black feminist thought theory, (b) intersectionality, and (c) glass ceiling theory. The participants discussed how their peers in leadership believed African American women got promoted into senior leadership positions because they were a minority, and not based on their qualifications. The average period it took for the 14 African American women to gain access into senior leadership positions was 15.6 years, which equates to 16 years for these women to even break into the glass ceiling of senior leadership. I have not discovered any research that reveals the average years it takes for White males and White females to go from entry level to senior leadership position. Therefore, it is imperative that research is conducted for transparency of timelines to compare their lived experiences for senior leadership opportunities compared to African American women average years to be promoted to senior leadership positions.

P1 described her experience:

Being in law enforcement, especially at the federal level, which is largely White male dominated, I think that often there's a fear of people, of women, of Black

people, of minorities all around, and especially gay folks who are navigating their careers, whether they would be accepted. So, for me, I feel there've been many opportunities that I've received, and people have looked at it as if it wasn't based on merit or my abilities, it's because I'm a woman or because I'm Black, because I'm a diversity candidate, that's always what people fall back on. They believe you got that position because you're this, and I think that that's why I've worked so hard throughout my career. I shouldn't have to do this, but I must prove myself, my worth and my value. So, people could say whatever they want, but my work would speak for itself and show that I didn't just get this position because I'm a diversity candidate, I got this position because I'm capable and I'm deserving. So, show up as who you are and how you are, be unapologetic about that, be open, speak your mind, and take advantage of the opportunity.

P7 stated,

It was horrible. It was the worst time. And it was the first time in my life, these were major disparities, I ended up in the emergency room and by the grace of God, I came home. It does become a threat, not only for your career, but on your personal health and that's whether you're trying to advance or not because even if you're not trying to advance everyone wants to be perceived as doing a good job, contributing to the organization and want to be treated fairly and when you see that your treatment is not fair or you're being treated differently, it impacts you. Even though you sit in the room with them, even though they act like they like you, they don't. Know that you are not accepted. My senior leadership was

dominated by all White males, I used that to my advantage, knowing diversity is important. People do not give us the same chances as they give our White counterparts. So, when I applied for promotions, I was denied and told that my accomplishments were not enough, however, it was enough for the person who was selected for the position before me. As I continued to excel, and exceeded the requirements, those same accomplishments were no longer a big deal.

P4 shared,

I trained and volunteered for everything I could. I kept my finger on the pulse, if the next best thing was computer forensics, I volunteered to do it. However, race wasn't my friend in my advancement. My race was more of a hindrance than anything because it's a straight good old boys' network and everyone making the decisions didn't look like me.

P9 explained,

When I retired, I was the Special Agent in Charge (SAC); it took me 20 years to be promoted to a senior leadership position. I officially started working in the federal government in 1991. You faced a lot of the backlash just for being a female and an African American woman, you're Black so they felt you came with a lot of baggage from their perspective because you know every time they say something, you voiced your opinion, or you spoke up. You were the angry Black woman. I had to dispel that, nah, there's no anger. I'm just passionate about the things that I feel.

P8 stated,

There was a time when I went to a SES training and people were trying to become SES, there were only a few of us that were already SES. I will never forget one gentleman who kept cutting me off in the middle of my conversation and it broke me. I said, I have been doing this for years, every time a Black female speaks, you must give your opinion, it's not your question, it's mine and I started crying. I told them, this happens with a lot of Black people, and I just laid it out (told them about the discrimination and disparities that Black people are subjected to as a minority).

Theme 3: Value of Mentorship and Support

The third theme correlated to the third research subquestion: How do the lived experiences of African American women who retired or currently in senior leadership roles within federal law enforcement shape their strategies and decisions? The themes were discussed by most of the participants. Subthemes also emerged: (a) mentors, (b) leadership support, and (c) networking. Each participant discussed how they needed a support system through various means of networks (peer support, mentors, and support groups) in order to remain effective, maintain their sanity and excel within leadership. P7 stated,

As Black women, we need a support network. I remember when my new supervisor came in, he was very tough on all his Black Assistant Special Agents in Charge (ASACs), who were all close friends, except for the one ASAC that was White, a White female. She got treated with kid gloves. My first meeting with him in another Black female ASAC office, he was screaming, yelling, and

hollering at her to the top of his lungs. And I saw him do the same thing with our fellow Black male ASAC. Although we all did eventually make it to the Special Agent in Charge level, we stuck together through everything. It goes back to that one minority senior staff member who was tough on the Black ASACs, and he was Black, who also had a relationship with senior staff (all White males), so it goes to show you that when it comes to dealing with racism, it's not always someone of a different race, sometimes it's the same race.

P14 stated, "Building a community is a highlight of my success. When I say the community, it was a community within internally and it was also the community externally."

P13 stated,

So formally and informally, I had the benefits after becoming a first line supervisor to be exposed to certain skills or other aspects of the job that unbeknownst to me, our leadership knew that I would need to have these skill sets or these experiences in my wheelhouse. I am never going to remove myself from the list of opportunities to get promoted or the list of opportunities to do a specific assignment.

P8 stated, "Network within your organization, have a mentor that you can trust, a mentor that's willing to help you understand the answers."

P3 stated,

I pursued professional improvement by earning an advanced degree and pursued various assignments to develop the competencies and knowledge to attain a senior

leadership position. I think getting my master's degree gave me an advantage over my colleagues because it removed the excuses.

Table 2

Emergent Themes for the Central Research Question and Two Subquestions

Research questions	Themes	Subthemes
What are the perceptions of senior African American women leaders in federal law enforcement about their lived experiences as they progressed to their current position?	Mental and spiritual welfare	a. Self-confidence b. Leveraging relationships c. Training opportunities
What meanings emerge from the lived experiences of African American women who retired or are currently holding senior leadership positions in federal law enforcement as they navigate the complexities of intersectionality within their careers?	Stagnation of African American senior female leaders	a. Black feminist thought theory b. Intersectionality c. Glass ceiling theory
How do the lived experiences of African American women who retired or are currently in senior leadership roles within federal law enforcement shape their strategies and decisions?	Value of mentorship and support	a. Mentors b. Leadership support c. Networking

Evidence of Trustworthiness

Credibility

Amankwaa (2016) pointed out that member checking is a means of addressing the validity of the study. Once the participants received their unedited transcript to view the researcher's interpretation of their responses transcribed via audio recording, they were able to ask questions, submit changes, provide clarification, or submit additions to their interview responses. This was another technique that the researcher used to ensure the

accuracy of the participants' responses concerning their lived experiences. To ensure the credibility of the study, I provided each participant with their individual transcript, and with the oversight of the IRB, my chairperson, and a committee member, these processes ensured the credibility of the research.

Transferability

I used a full description of the research methods to ensure the transferability of the data findings. I listened closely to the lived experiences of each participant while ensuring each story was captured in a manner that all readers would be able to understand. Amankwaa (2016) discussed the importance of providing a detailed description of the data, as the findings allow the reader to understand the transferable contexts from one individual's experience to another. By ensuring transferability, it allowed the interview process to capture clear and credible details of the participants' stories (Connolly, 2016). A detailed depiction of the study allows other phenomenological studies to verify the generalizability and validity for similar research.

Dependability

Dependability was what reflected the factual, consistent, and reliable nature of the data. The qualitative research captured the audit sequences, clusters, codes, emergent themes, and triangulation that were used to show patterns from other research studies (Brancu, 2018; Yu, 2020a). This study analyzed data captured from in-depth interviews through Delve, which also identified codes, themes, and subthemes. I secured all field notes in a locked file cabinet and maintained all data on a password protected computer to ensure the validity of the process.

Confirmability

Often confirmability is known as “the neutrality of the researcher.” The qualitative data are validated when the data are analyzed and have a pattern of likeness (Amankwaa, 2016). The participants’ responses reflected their lived experiences and not any biases or interests of the researcher. The appropriate strategies to establish confirmability included using transcribed video recordings with direct quotes from the participants to capture their perspective and identify emerging themes within the study (Cope, 2014). As an African American woman who retired from federal law enforcement as a senior leader, I annotated emotions and responses that were shared during the interview process to reduce any preconceived biases.

Results

The researcher addressed one central research question: What are the perceptions of senior African American women leaders in federal law enforcement about their lived experiences as they progressed to their current position?

Two subquestions were as follows:

1. What meanings emerge from the lived experiences of African American women who retired or are currently holding senior leadership positions in federal law enforcement as they navigate the complexities of intersectionality within their careers?
2. How do the lived experiences of African American women who retired or are currently in senior leadership roles within federal law enforcement shape their strategies and decisions?

Based on the provided themes and subthemes, the thematic analysis of African American women's experiences in senior leadership positions in federal law enforcement reveals several key findings. Question 1 provided a platform that allowed the researcher the opportunity to obtain the current position of the participant as well as how long it took them to reach senior leadership level from entry level of the agency until GS-15 position, the first position of senior leadership. Question 2 assisted the researcher in finding what personal or professional factors contributed to the success of attaining a senior leadership position. Question 3 requested specific senior leadership characteristics that assisted in the development of their career advancement. Question 4 requested the steps the participants used to prepare them for senior leadership positions. Question 5 allowed the researcher to gain insight into how developing relationships influenced their ascent into senior leadership.

These five questions revealed the key theme of mental and spiritual welfare. Participants emphasized the importance of mental and spiritual well-being in navigating their career paths. This theme encompasses three subthemes:

- Self-confidence: African American women highlighted the significance of self-confidence in overcoming challenges and advancing in their careers.
- Leveraging relationships: Building and maintaining relationships were key strategies identified by participants to navigate the complexities of their careers.
- Training opportunities: Access to training and development opportunities was seen as crucial for career progression.

Question 6 directly asked the participant if they faced any organizational challenges impacted by intersectionality and how they addressed the challenges. Question 7 allowed the researcher to find out how training opportunities, education, and intersectionality played a role in their career advancement. Question 8 asked the participants, looking through the lens of intersectionality, what advice would they give to other African American women seeking senior leadership progression.

Questions 6-8 discussed the coping methods used by the intersectionality theory, creating the key themes of stagnation of African American senior female leaders. For this theme, participants discussed the challenges faced by African American women in senior leadership roles, including the following subthemes:

- Black feminist thought theory: This theory suggests that African American women experience unique challenges due to their intersectional identities, which can impact their career progression.
- Intersectionality: Participants highlighted the intersectionality of race and gender as significant factors influencing their experiences in senior leadership roles.
- Glass ceiling theory: The concept of a glass ceiling limiting the advancement of African American women in leadership positions was discussed as a barrier to their progression.

Question 9 allowed the participants the opportunity to discuss how they perceived the underrepresentation of African American women in senior leadership roles. Question 10 allowed the participants to discuss key factors they utilized to ascend to the next level

in senior leadership. And lastly, Question 11 allowed participants to express how they experienced the negative impacts of career advancement based on the disparate treatment of African American women in senior leadership positions. Questions 9-11 discussed the coping methods used by the intersectionality theory, creating the key theme of meanings from lived experiences. For this theme, participants shared insights into the meanings derived from their experiences, including the following subthemes:

- Value of mentorship and support: Mentorship, leadership support, and networking were identified as critical systems for career success and advancement.
- Strategies and decisions: Participants discussed how their experiences in senior leadership roles shaped their strategies and decision-making processes.

Most of the participants discussed the various levels of networking (formal and informal) that help define the obstacles for African American women's advancement to senior leadership positions in law enforcement (Catalyst, 2023). The participants expressed their need for mentors, support groups, networks, supportive leaders, peer support, training opportunities, self-confidence, and faith to make it through prejudices, organizational barriers, social stereotypes, discrimination, marginalization, invisibility, disparate treatment, and various forms of reprisal and retaliations throughout their career. Participants also discussed how they used wisdom and grit to be successful in their journey within senior leadership positions.

Even though U.S. federal law enforcement agencies have expanded rapidly over the past 2 decades, they are still White male dominated (Duffin, 2019). Even today, it is

unfortunate that African American women are not received by the leaders in this male-dominant profession and constantly are faced with discrimination, harassment, sexual harassment, retaliation, and the withholding of career advancement opportunities (Brooks, 2019). As the data derived from the three frameworks, incorporating the intersectionality framework may allow leaders to approach concerns of how White male leaders tend to evaluate race and gender through the lens of White men and use their White privilege to dominate leadership positions in various organizations such as law enforcement. These agencies struggle to create a work environment that is not discriminatory toward women and minorities (Yu, 2020b).

Hamilton (2020) discussed the continuous challenges of applying Black feminist thought, the second framework, to traditional masculine hierarchies of power. Hamilton revealed how Black feminist thought can assist researchers in developing methodologies and practices to navigate and critique masculine social structures. Some practices have proven how African American women developed tools and strategies that enabled them to navigate oppression in the workforce (Sales et al., 2020).

Lastly, Yu (2020a) discussed how non-White women not only experience negative attitudes from their male counterparts, but they also face disparities and ramifications of the glass ceiling effect, the third framework. Although White women often discuss their struggles concerning glass ceiling disparities, they often do not discuss the differences between their experiences and those of African American women in the same position. Yu (2020a) explored the occupational barriers of African American women against the barriers of White women in federal law enforcement and the stark

contrast of how White men disproportionately mistreated African American women in the workforce. Decker (2018) discussed how imperative it is for law enforcement agencies to accept inclusive leadership practices and benefits (Fritsvold, 2019). The literature review revealed that there was a minimum amount of research that examined the developmental resources needed to prepare and support African American women in senior leadership in federal law enforcement organizations. African American women are underrepresented in senior leadership positions in federal law enforcement, and they deserve to have their voices heard. This study allowed their voices to be heard and understood.

Although many African American women have defied the odds against the oppressive social norms within federal law enforcement, decades later there are some African American women who have chosen not to relive the adverse experiences they navigated while they were in senior leadership roles. Two retired SES potential participants chose not to be a part of the study because they did not want to relive the traumatic events they experienced during their tenure in federal law enforcement senior leadership positions. One trail blazer even expressed that although there are more women in senior leadership positions than when she was working, they are still marginalized, discriminated against, devalued, and underrepresented. This is why further research is necessary to address opportunities for prolific social change for African American women who seek senior leadership positions in federal law enforcement.

Summary

Chapter 4's purpose was to provide the analysis of the lived experiences of African American women in senior leadership within federal law enforcement. The women in this study were selected using a purposeful sampling approach in tandem with snowball sampling. Each participant identified themselves as African American women who are retired or currently working in a senior leadership position within federal law enforcement. The study design focused on intersectionality theory, Black feminist thought theory, and the glass ceiling theory. The study delved into the challenges faced by African American women in senior leadership positions (e.g., GS-15 and SES roles) within the federal law enforcement agencies.

In order to gain a better understanding of this phenomenological study, I used a primary research question and two subquestions to create the overarching themes that were derived from an analysis of the participants' responses to the interview questions. The interview questions used in the study provided the researcher with the assistance necessary to answer the questions. Qualitative research entails gaining in-depth insight into people's lived experiences, issues, or concerns (Creswell, 2014).

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

As discussed in various research studies and statistical data (Brooks, 2019), the career advancement of African American women is stunted, based on their underrepresentation within federal law enforcement agencies (Gurman, 2018), and equitable opportunities for career growth are essential to them ascending into senior leadership positions. The purpose of this interpretative phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences and perception of African American women within senior leadership roles in federal law enforcement. I explored the lived experiences of 14 African American women who work or have worked in senior leadership positions within federal law enforcement.

This study addressed the gaps in the research literature that revealed that African American women in leadership roles used their leadership grit to attain career advancement within senior leadership positions to address challenges of intersectionality and all the issues that come with it (Columbia Law School, 2017). The reason for choosing this qualitative phenomenological study was that it allowed me the opportunity to explore African American women's lived experiences of the barriers they faced and overcame when ascending into senior leadership positions within federal law enforcement agencies. I conducted semistructured interviews with 14 African American women who retired or currently work in a senior leadership position (GS-15 and SES levels) in federal law enforcement. The literature findings identified in Chapter 2 have been compared with the study results to determine whether the research added any informational knowledge to better understand the underrepresentation of African

American women in senior leadership positions used to explore their lived experiences based on the three conceptual frameworks used in the study. Overall, the thematic analysis highlights the complex and multifaceted experiences of African American women in senior leadership positions in federal law enforcement, emphasizing the importance of mental and spiritual well-being, the challenges of intersectionality, and the value of mentorship and support in their career progression.

Interpretation of Findings

These phenomenological study findings confirm that African American women still face resistance within their career advancement opportunities in senior leadership positions (Fernandes, 2016; Marshall, 2013; McLeod, n.d.; Swan, 2016). As determined in the literature review, nonminority women do not encounter the same levels of discrimination as African American women who deal with being overlooked for career progression assignments and promotional advancement opportunities (Thompson, 2017).

The lived experiences of African American women were aligned with the conceptual framework of the study. The literature reviewed in the study focused on African American women who were not federal law enforcement in senior leadership, African American women from non-law enforcement organizations, and women of color in federal law enforcement agencies. However, there were few, if any, that addressed the lived experiences of African American women in senior leadership positions within federal law enforcement. To ensure interpretations did not exceed the data, findings, and scope of this study, I conducted an interpretative phenomenological study that enabled me as the researcher to collect, analyze, and interpret data based solely on the

participants' responses. This study's literature review confirmed the findings that African American women within senior leadership positions in federal law enforcement endured challenges of hardship throughout their tenure in senior leadership positions.

Limitations of the Study

Creswell (2014) discussed the limitations of qualitative research which was used for this study. These limitations determine the usefulness of the research findings (Creswell, 2014). The limitations of the study are gender, race, and sample size. This study used 14 participants' lived experiences to represent the amount of African American women within senior leadership positions in federal law enforcement; therefore, these lived experiences cannot collectively cover the differences of this population. However, the data reflect how African American women are underrepresented in senior leadership positions in federal law enforcement agencies. Another limitation is that biases against African American women may influence the data. These biases are based on societal norms and both the personal and professional experiences of African American women. African American women's lived experiences, values, and cultural beliefs may influence the interpretation of the data. Although one's biases may be known, the human element in research may influence the findings of the study.

Recommendations

The findings obtained from the study provided knowledge concerning the underrepresentation of African American women in senior leadership positions in federal law enforcement. The phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of African

American women in senior leadership positions. One recommendation is to engage federal law enforcement executives, senior department leaders, human resources department leaders, and training department leaders the opportunity for these professionals to create a career progression strategy through ongoing mentoring programs and advanced leadership initiatives to enable them to implement prolific changes agency wide. The broader population this study could affect would be minorities.

The next recommendation is to explore whether the population would benefit if agency leaders and human resource management use the data from this study to address barriers concerning the employment of African American women. Addressing these barriers may create an efficient and effective diverse workforce that will build competent leadership behaviors, embrace, and promote diversity, and enhance positive organizational cultures.

The final recommendation is to continue research through a conceptual framework that would focus on other minority populations, for example, Native Americans and Asian Pacific Islanders. Not only would addressing the underrepresentation of any group of women in senior leadership roles allow these groups to promote culture diversity and inclusion, but the organization will also lay a foundation that will respect and value upstanding officers, and they will build a bench of experienced candidates who will become the senior leaders of the agency through professional assessments and not the good ole boy network of succession planning.

Implications

This qualitative phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of African American women in senior leadership positions in federal law enforcement. The positive social change that can derive from this study is impactful as the research revealed how African American women have outwitted federal law enforcement executive leaders in a manner that helped shape strategies for future African American women to maneuver within senior leadership positions. Even though the system was not created for African American women to be a part of the higher echelon, once these women cracked the ceiling, their suppressors continued to present organizational barriers that would hinder their growth within senior leadership. When African American women are seated at the senior leadership table, it gives the organization a positive and visual impact.

To address this group's underrepresentation, organizational barriers, and disparate treatment, there needs to be an organizational promotional structure. The agency executives must be willing to address the development and implementation of policies and procedures, leadership initiatives, diversity and inclusion courses, succession planning and mentoring programs. These approaches can start by having a dialog with African American women in senior leadership roles that will transform into action plans to enhance the representation of African American women in senior leadership within federal law enforcement.

The hiring and promotional process needs an overhaul from the entry level of qualified African American women entering federal law enforcement, to the rise of

professional growth of mid-level leaders, to ultimately promoting experienced senior leaders through the succession planning process. The current process is inadequate at best; therefore, new action plan techniques are not only necessary, but imperative to create a successful process that will extend their experiences without promotional stagnation through lateral assignments with no upward mobility, collateral duties that serve no career progressions and training opportunities that have no merit for promotional progress. This type of initiative could lead to the hiring of a certain percentage of qualified African American women in federal law enforcement.

Next, there should be a shadowing program that would allow firsthand experiences for the mentee to understand what the position entails. This not only extends to the change of agency policies, but it also extends to social norms. These replications may impact not only the individual, but their family, and communities in which they live through organizational, and social policies. These optimistic outlooks are pivotal to obtaining realistic goals which will allow African American women the opportunity to accent further in senior leadership positions without direct promotions leaving a stigma that they are not qualified to compete against their White peers, or they are needed in predominantly White geographical locations to bring about diversity in an office of just their oneself. The change that is necessary to embrace cultural diversity must be the change senior leaders see in themselves to make an impact that will create a well diverse culture for the future of federal law enforcement agencies.

Conclusions

In summary, this research illuminated the lived experiences of African American women who were able to tell their story of dedication to service and the grit it took to work in senior leadership roles. These women not only endured but overcame the challenges of intersectionality and the glass ceiling disparities. The data confirmed how African American women in senior leadership continuously face disparities, marginalization, discrimination, and underrepresentation within senior leadership roles. Some of the literature discussed the reasons behind the disparate and discriminatory treatment experienced by these women, exploring barriers blocking opportunities and unfair treatment. Additionally, the study investigated the potential impact of diversity and inclusion on promotional opportunities for African American women in senior positions, with the goal of bridging the representation gap. The findings and recommendations may aid in increasing diversity and equitable representation of African American women in senior leadership and executive roles within federal law enforcement agencies.

Through their tenacity, the participants interviewed in this study defied the glass ceiling and their experiences of intersectionality. The message that was captured in the study was that based on their tenacity, resilience, optimism, and religious beliefs, regardless of the challenges they faced, the participants were still able to be successful in their journey. Ever since African American women entered the United States workforce, they were only allowed to work in domestic roles. As maids in White people's homes, they were never accepted as a member of the household regardless of how many years they were a domestic caregiver for that family; they were always perceived as the

“outsider within.” They have always been discriminated against, physically and mentally abused, invisible, and marginalized. The systemic racism, intentionally woven within the fabric of American society, has always exacerbated injustice for African American women.

Despite the challenges African American women have experienced in the workplace and in society, they understand the tenacity that it takes to break through barriers by learning what it takes to navigate the organization (Dubois, 2017). Even with the minimal literature discovered over the past 5 decades, recent studies have revealed that nonminority women do not encounter the same levels of discrimination as African American women who deal with being overlooked for career progression assignments and promotional advancement opportunities (Thompson, 2017). Therefore, the need for transparency through further research will account for variances in time frames regarding the gap between White men and women versus other ethnic groups in federal law enforcement. This will help to discover the average number of years it takes for White men and women to go from entry level to senior leadership positions, revealing the need for prolific social change within federal law enforcement.

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Appendix: Interview Guide

Interview start time: 11:00am

Interview completion time: 1–2 hours

Interviewee code number: (TBD)

First, I want to thank you again for taking the time from your busy schedule to participate in my study. I sincerely appreciate your cooperation and support for my research. As mentioned in the informed consent materials, this study seeks to understand how your lived experiences as an African American woman serving or have served in a senior leadership position in federal law enforcement agencies affected you and your work as a senior leader. I will be asking you to describe the specific characteristics and behaviors of biases and occupational barriers, if any.

Also, I will ask you to describe how your experience with the characteristics and behaviors of your agency leaders or supervisors either facilitated or interfered with factors related to work performance, such as completing tasks, motivation, and commitment to your job and the organization. Please remember as we proceed that I would like you to focus just on your experiences as a senior leader in your federal law enforcement agency.

Do you have any questions before we begin?

Okay, let us get started. Technically speaking, how would you describe your lived experiences as an African American woman in a senior leadership position in your current or past positions in federal law enforcement agencies?

What are the perceptions of African American women who are currently serving or have served as senior leader in federal law enforcement about their lived experiences as they matriculated in their position?

Two sub questions will be considered:

1. What meanings emerge from the lived experiences of African American women retired or currently holding senior leadership positions in federal law enforcement as they navigate the complexities of intersectionality within their careers?
2. How do the lived experiences of African American women who retired or currently in senior leadership roles within federal law enforcement shape their strategies and decisions?

Interview Questions

1. What is or was the title of your current or previous senior leadership position, and how long did it take you to achieve this position (e.g., GS-15, SES or equivalent)?
2. What personal or professional factors do you believe have contributed to your success in federal law enforcement, particularly in attaining a senior leadership position?
3. How do you perceive the underrepresentation of African American women in senior leadership positions in federal law enforcement, and what do you think are the reasons behind this phenomenon?
4. Can you identify a specific senior level leadership characteristic that played a significant role in your career development? How did this characteristic contribute to your advancement?
5. What steps did you take to prepare yourself for a senior level leadership position in federal law enforcement?

6. To what extent did developing relationships influence your ascent to a senior level position in the workplace?
7. Have you faced any organizational challenges related to intersectionality or perceptions in your career? How did you approach and make decisions to address these challenges?
8. How did training opportunities, education, and intersectionality play a role in enhancing your career advancement to the senior level position?
9. From your perspective, what are key factors in senior leadership that African American women can utilize to ascend to the next level in their career within federal law enforcement?
10. Have you experienced any negative impacts on the advancement of your career due to the disparity of African American women in senior leadership positions?
11. Looking through the lens of intersectionality, what advice would you offer to African American women in senior leadership positions to help them progress further in their careers within the federal law enforcement workplace?