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The Experiences of Veteran African American Military Officers with Social Influences on Promotions and Career Opportunities

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Walden University

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Walden University

College of Psychology and Community Services

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Veronica Denise Green

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Walden University
2024

Abstract

The Experiences of Veteran African American Military Officers with Social Influences
on Promotions and Career Opportunities

by

Veronica Denise Green

MA, Oklahoma University, 2002

BS, North Carolina Agriculture and Technical State University, 1989

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Human and Social Services – Doctor of Philosophy in Human Services

Walden University

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Abstract

While programs and procedures are in place in the US Military to increase diversity and inclusion of minorities and women in senior level positions, the problem is African Americans continue to remain below the relative national percentage rate compared to their White male counterparts. The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore African American veteran Military officers' experiences with promotion and access to career opportunities, and to identify how their social and cultural relationships influenced those opportunities. Khawaja's theory of workplace relationships provided a lens into the key role of relationships in organizational conflict, teamwork, and inclusion in each employee's professional life. A purposive convenience sample of six African American veteran Military officers participated in individual interviews to explore their experiences of social belonging and career opportunities in the Military, and the data collected was analyzed using thematic content analysis resulting in six themes: 1) mentorship is needed for leadership development, 2) Military officers need to take personal initiative in professional development and job opportunities, 3) junior officers set personal career aspirations, 4) lack of guidance and a career plan hindered career progression, 5) cultural and social groups influenced job opportunities, and, 6) there were perceived strong connections with peers and senior leaders who shared cultural and social groups. These findings may impact social change by informing research and training in cultural and social group awareness in the Military and encouraging the Department of Defense to reform mentoring and career development for minority officers, aiming for more equitable and inclusive representation at the Military's senior level.

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Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to all of my heavenly angels who watched over me throughout this extensive, yet rewarding, endeavor—especially my grandparents, Fred and Viola Green; my aunts, Kay Miller, Loretta Wilson, Doris Green, and Alfreda Ramseur; my in-laws, Willie and Joanetta Green; and my military niece and sorority sister, Tadzy Hall. I miss each of you, but I know you were cheering for me, and I felt your presence during the late-night studying, writing, moments of exhaustion, and times when I felt like taking a break. You were the wind beneath my wings that kept me going. I miss you dearly.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Organizational diversity and inclusion are more than hiring employees from different races, religions, genders, cultures, and social groups. Diversity policies require ensuring every employee feels a sense of belonging, has the same career opportunities, and finds acceptance in bringing their unique experiences and talents to the organization with recognition for their individual contributions (Ferraro et al., 2023). The US Military continues to develop policies and practices to improve recruitment and promotion opportunities for a more diverse, fair, and equitable representation of individuals. However, a comparatively low number of African American officers are promoted to colonel or higher in the US Military. There is an underrepresentation of people of color and women as Military officers, especially in general officer and senior-level positions (McClellan, 2020). In 2019, African Americans comprised 23% of the enlisted Military population yet represented just 11% of the active-duty officer corps. Despite literature on the disparity gap in African American officers' promotions, there is minimal discussion on the cause-and-effect at all levels of the organization (Cooper, 2020). People of racial and ethnic minorities in the federal government have significantly lower odds of promotion than their White counterparts (Heath, 2021).

In June 2021, the President of the United States signed an executive order recognizing the federal government as the nation's largest employer and identifying its need to model diversity, inclusion, and equity for all employees (Executive Order No. 14035, 2021). The order requires the federal government to improve its program for hiring, promoting, and keeping the talent of a diverse nation and removing processes or

procedures that prohibit equal opportunities. As a result, the US Military chief of staff revised the branch's policies to create a more diverse, inclusive, and fair organization.

Despite US Military programs to improve equity for minorities and women, members of these populations hold significantly fewer senior-level positions than their White male counterparts (Department of Defense, 2021). There have been many quantitative studies into diversity, inclusion, and equity related to policies and programs. However, I found limited qualitative research in the study of marginalized groups' experiences of promotion and career opportunities and how workplace relationships influence career opportunities. Studies show the need for managers to understand the importance of workplace relationships and cultivate an environment that focuses on well-being; employees are less focused on salary or benefits, and the organization tends to be more productive (Seppälä & McNichols, 2022). However, there is a gap in understanding the experiences of African American veteran Military officers with promotion and career opportunities and the influence of their cultural or social affiliations on their opportunities.

Diversity fosters innovation and creativity and leads to better productivity and performance success. This study shows African American veteran Military officers' experience with having a sense of belonging with equal opportunities and a sense of trust. The findings provide data for human service managers to conduct research and training on cultural and social group awareness in the Military to improve the accession and retention of African American officers. The study also provides insight into African

American officers' career and promotion opportunities to help African Americans reach the senior officer level.

Chapter 1 provides the background of the study, including a summary of the literature, the research gap, the study's focus, and the need for such research. The problem statement indicates the need to address the identified research gap. Chapter 1 includes the purpose of the study, the exploration guided by the research questions, and the theoretical framework used to approach the study. There is a discussion of the nature of the study and the phenomenon under investigation. After presenting the limitations, the chapter concludes with a summary of the main points.

Background

Individuals will gravitate toward what is comfortable and familiar. In the workplace, employees are likely to establish relationships with coworkers who share the same values, beliefs, and cultural and social behaviors (Khawaja, 2020). These characteristics could also affect how individuals select mentors or others they trust for advice or assistance with career goals or job opportunities. Studies show that marginalized groups lag significantly behind their White male counterparts in senior-level positions. This gap could impact underrepresented individuals at the Military senior level or those in positions responsible for promotions or career advancement. Although there is research related to unfair workplace treatment of minorities based on racism and inequality, literature on unfair practices based on other factors, such as participation in cultural or specific social groups at work, is scarce.

Khawaja (2020) used the theoretical framework of workplace relationships to explore the role of relationships in professional life. The researcher indicated the need for successful relationships to share benefits, stay engaged, or compete in the workplace. Employees require a high level of trust in workplace relationships. Individuals who lack trustworthy relationships may develop workplace relationships with people they consider competitors for the purpose of self-preservation.

The theoretical framework of workplace relationships provides a lens into how individuals build relationships on trust and an understanding of each other's motivations. If organizational leaders and managers understand each employee's needs, goals, and motivators, they can support inclusive cultural and social workplace relationships and have a more productive organization. However, some leaders believe the systems are fair and that individuals handle their own career opportunities.

Gündemir and Galinsky (2018) found that working in an organization with multicultural relationships can negatively affect workplace relationships through conscious and unconscious bias, concealing discrimination, or even delegitimizing the act. The study showed that White and racial minority workers had a false perception of fairness based on the policies and procedures in place and viewed claims of discrimination as less legitimate. An added belief was that multicultural relationships in the workplace can cause anyone to feel excluded, even if their social or cultural group is the majority (Gündemir & Galinsky, 2018).

The study fills a gap on the cultural and social workplace relationships of retired African American Military officers, their experiences with promotion and career

opportunities, and the influence of the cultural and social workplace. Research shows that diversity fosters innovation and creativity and leads to better productivity and performance success. With this study, I discovered African American veteran Military officers experienced a sense of disconnection with their predominately White senior leadership. They also perceived their White peers had an advantage in job opportunities because of shared cultural and social groups with that of their senior leaders and managers, which fostered a lack of trust. The findings provide Military human service managers with data to conduct research and training on cultural and social group awareness to help improve the accession and retention of African Americans to the senior level of the Military. African American officers' insight into their career and promotion opportunities could help more African American officers reach the senior officer level and fill top Military positions.

The representation of women and individuals of color are not equitable to their White counterparts as senior officers in the Military. Research shows women and individuals of color are less likely to choose Military jobs in the combat arms and operational fields that have more advancement opportunities. Individuals will gravitate to what is comfortable and familiar. Even in the workplace, employees are likely to have relationships with other employees who share the same values, beliefs, and cultural and social behaviors (Khawaja, 2020). In 2019, African Americans comprised 23% of the enlisted Military, while they only represented 11% of the active-duty officer corps.

Diversity refers to the differences in race, ethnicity, disability, and sexual orientation. Organizational leaders cannot provide a voice for all employees without

proper diversity, inclusion, and equity at all levels. A lack of diversity could lead to group think, a failure to innovate, or an inability to meet consumers' diversity-related needs (Martinez, 2022).

Quantitative researchers have focused on the lack of minorities in federal senior-level position and their unfair treatment based on racism or a lack of qualifications, training, or career development plans to compete for senior-level positions (Asch et al., 2012; Brooks, 2020). There is literature on the exclusion or underrepresentation of marginalized groups (e.g., African Americans, Native Americans, Hispanics, women, and individuals with disabilities) in corporate America, specifically in science, technology, engineering, medicine, and math (STEMM). Scholars have researched the federal government and the need to increase diversity with plans focused on recruitment and training. Even with the increase in marginal groups in higher education, individuals from minorities still fall behind in senior positions. For example, in science, minorities receive 11% of research doctorates yet comprise 27% of the population (Konkel, 2015). In Konkel's (2015) study, women and minorities surveyed showed the lack of diversity in senior faculty positions and awards and their exclusion from or lack of support in work groups. The respondents were not confident that they would meet their career goals due to their lack of work relationships.

Diverse workplace relationships lead to more creative problem-solving, innovation, and organizational success (Chaudhry et al., 2021). Organizational leaders should recognize the company's success and support an equitable program providing all

employees, irrespective of workplace cultural and social groups, the same opportunities for promotions, leadership, and awards (Inegbedion et al., 2020).

Gündemir and Galinsky (2018) examined the possible negative impacts of multiculturalism and whether organizational diversity structures geared toward multiculturalism could lead to concealed racial discrimination and delegitimized racial discrimination claims. The results revealed that even when objective information was indicative of discrimination, both Whites and racial minorities perceived their organizations' diversity policies to be fair in promoting multiculturalism. These findings are important to my topic because they are indicative of most organizations in the form of overall diversity. Further, Gündemir and Galinsky found a need to identify perceptions of fairness and inclusion at all levels of the organization, including career progression to senior-level positions in federal organizations.

Problem Statement

The problem that prompted me to review the literature is the low number of African Americans promoted to senior-level positions in the Military. While current programs and procedures are in place to increase the Military's diversity and inclusion of minorities and women, they are still below their White male officers and national percentage in Military senior-level positions. Khawaja's (2020) and similar studies inspired my interest in how workplace relationships could influence career opportunities. While research has proposed the importance of social relationships for advancement and promotion, I have not found qualitative studies that explore the experiences of African

American officers and their social relationships in the influence their workplace social relationships have on their career progression.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore African American veteran Military officers' experiences with promotion and career opportunities and how their social and cultural relationships influenced those opportunities. The theoretical framework of workplace relationships indicates the key role of relationships in organizational conflict, teamwork, and inclusion in each employee's professional life (Khawaja, 2020). This includes looking at the need for successful relationships to share benefits, stay engaged, or compete. The theory of workplace relationships also accounts for the ability to move from one group to another. Employees who associate with others in their in-group may have limited interaction with out-group members. Employees and leaders may show in-group favoritism, creating conflict and unfavorable behavior toward those outside of their social groups (Hogg, 2020). Inegbedion et al. (2020) found that diversity management significantly influences cultural diversity, employees' beliefs of marginalization, and organizational conflict.

The theoretical framework of workplace relationships aligns with the proposed study specific to intergroup behaviors, the trust and support of workplace relationships, and the experiences of African American veteran Military officers on their career and promotion opportunities and how their social and cultural relationships influenced those opportunities. There can be diversity within an organization, yet individuals may experience conflict or not feel included or fairly represented at all levels (McClellan,

2020). This division applies to minorities and women in the US Military, with both groups underrepresented as officers and senior leaders (Kofoed & McGovney, 2019; McClellan, 2020). Underrepresentation affects the future of the Military's accession, employment, promotion, and retention of minorities. Thus, there is a need for cultural and policy changes to decrease the adverse effects of continued implicit racial bias (McClellan, 2020). The more engaged senior leaders are in minimizing employee perceptions of marginalization and conflict and building cultural diversity, the more likely the organization will have an efficient and effective diverse workplace culture at all levels (Inegbedion et al., 2020). The theoretical framework of workplace relationships provided a lens into how workers build relationships on trust. Further, the framework is appropriate to decide whether the relationships create a sense of belonging to a specific cultural, gender, or social group and whether sharing the same social group as one's supervisor or mentor affects employees' career opportunities. I used the theoretical framework of workplace relationships to conduct audio interviews with open-ended questions to explore if African American veteran officers experienced their promotion and career opportunities as influenced by their cultural or social group affiliation. Specifically, I explored whether their relationships were external to or inclusive of their workplace leadership.

This study shows how cultural and social workplace relationships influence employees' career opportunities. Military senior leaders could use the findings to develop organizational diversity and inclusion strategies considering each service member's cultural and social differences, incorporating diversity into training, group assignments,

and career decisions. Corporate agency leaders may refer to the findings in developing plans for equality and inclusion despite workplace relationships.

Research Questions

The research questions for this study were as follows:

RQ1. What are the experiences of African American veteran Military officers about their promotions and career opportunities during their active duty?

RQ2. What are African American veteran Military officers' perceptions of whether or how their cultural and social groups influenced their career opportunities?

Theoretical Framework

Khawaja's (2020) theory of workplace relationships framed this study. The theory addresses the role of relationships in an individual's professional life, indicating the need for successful relationships to share benefits, stay engaged, or compete (Khawaja, 2020). There is a human need to build trust; in other cases, employees create a relationship with their competitors, intending to sabotage or cause damage. Individuals can move from one group to another. Cultural and social groups, such as family, fraternities, and sports teams, are a source of trust, pride, self-esteem, and belonging. According to Hogg (2020), individuals assign others to specific cultural and social groups, often through stereotypes, and decide if that person is a member of their in-group (heterogeneous) or an out-group (homogeneous). The in-group shares similar attitudes, behaviors, and characteristics. Individuals who associate only with their in-group members may have limited interactions with people from the out-groups (Hogg, 2020). Although researchers have investigated this issue, I have found no studies on African American veteran Military

officers' experiences with promotions and career opportunities and the influence of social and cultural work relationships on their career and promotion opportunities. The theoretical framework provided a lens into an individual's motivation and how relationships develop. If organization leaders and managers understand employees' needs, they can support individual relationships where everyone feels included and becomes more productive.

Nature of the Study

For this qualitative study, I conducted multiple cases to explore the career and promotion experiences of a convenience sample of African American veteran military officers and the cultural or social group influences on their career opportunities. The participants were African American veteran officers who served in the US Military in the grade of major or higher. Data collection occurred through semistructured interviews with open-ended questions designed based on the literature. I collected narrative data on the experiences of African American veteran Military officers on their promotion and career opportunities. I also analyzed archival data on promotions and career opportunities within the participants' service periods to support their experiences.

Definitions of Terms

The following terms used in the study may have multiple meanings or different uses among diverse cultures, genders, races, and ethnic groups.

African American: A racial category of individuals with origins in any Black racial group of African or African descent (United States Census Bureau, 2022). The

term recognizes the diverse backgrounds and heritage of individuals who identify within this racial category (U.S. Office of Management and Budget, 1997).

Field grade officer: A military term to refer to an officer who holds a rank typically appointed as major, lieutenant colonel, or colonel. The military has three officer tiers: company grades (O-1–O-3), field grades (O-4–O-6), and general officers (O-7–O-10). Field grade officers are senior leaders, and general officers are the equivalent of senior executives (U.S. Office of Management and Budget, 1997).

Marginalized group: Individuals excluded from mainstream social, economic, educational, or cultural life. Examples of marginalized populations are those excluded due to race, gender identity, sexual orientation, age, physical ability, language, and immigration status. Marginalization occurs due to unequal power relationships between social groups (Sevelius et al., 2019).

Implicit or unconscious bias: A form of social behavior driven by learned behavior or stereotypes that work automatically without any thought or unconsciously when interacting with others (Roberts, 2011; U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 2012).

Multicultural relationships: Shared by individuals from diverse cultures with different customs, values, and beliefs as part of an organization or social group without distinctions (Villotti et al., 2019).

Workforce diversity: A workplace population comprised of a wide variety of individuals with diverse backgrounds working together to help agencies pursue organizational goals efficiently and effectively (U.S. Office of Personnel Management

[OPM}, 2011a). Diversity attributes include national origin, language, race, color, disability, ethnicity, gender, age, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity, socioeconomic status, veteran status, and family structures (OPM, 2011b). Workplace diversity also encompasses differences among people concerning where they are from, where they have lived, and their differences in thought and life experiences (OPM, 2011a).

Workforce inclusion: A culture that unites employees as a core part of the organization, encourages collaboration, flexibility, and fairness, and leverages diversity throughout the organization in a manner that allows all individuals to participate at their full potential in accomplishing organization goals (OPM, 2011a).

Workplace relationship: A connection individually based and uniquely interpersonal. Workplace relationships directly affect an employee's actions, attitudes, and behaviors on the job. Workplace relationships can be peer-to-peer, supervisor-employee, or mentor-mentee and may affect the challenges and rewards of management (McKeown & Ayoko, 2020).

Assumptions

There were several assumptions related to this study. The first assumption was that African American veteran military officers recognized the lack of African American officers serving as general officers or in senior-level positions. The second is that African American Military veteran officers would participate in the study because of its significance. The third assumption was that in-depth, semistructured interviews would be proper to explore the experiences of African American veteran Military officers

regarding promotion and career opportunities and whether their social or cultural groups influenced their career opportunities. The fourth assumption was that participants would respond candidly to the interview questions. Finally, the fifth assumption was that the study would produce findings for future research, support social change in workplace relationships for the Military's diversity and inclusion program, and apply them to other federal and corporate organizations.

Scope and Delimitations

Six field-grade African American veteran military officers shared their experiences of promotion and career opportunities and whether their social and cultural groups influenced their career opportunities. I selected this demographic due to the underrepresentation of African American officers in general officer or senior-level positions in the Military. The sparse number of minorities selected for promotion to field grade or higher has been a decades-long concern, and the military is continuously developing policies and procedures to improve the disparity. I recruited male and female Military African American veteran officers between the ranks of major and general from organizations with Military members associated with this demographic. Demographic information collected only included those items needed for the study: race, years of service, rank at end of service, and gender. I presented all the demographic data in aggregate to avoid identifying any individual. White officers represent the majority of the field-grade level and senior Military positions and exceed their national percentage and thus not included in the study. Researchers have related the disparity to racism and systemic and structural biases, with White officers dominating the senior-level positions

and promotion system (Butler, 1976; Gamble, 2020). There is little to no information on how social and cultural workplace relationships influence career and promotion opportunities, especially those driven by managers, mentors, or decision-makers.

Limitations

Limitations to this study include the participants' ability to recall experiences or associate their social or cultural groups' influence on their career or promotion opportunities. Soliciting the experiences of African American field grade and general officers and excluding junior officers, enlisted soldiers, and members of other marginalized groups who faced similar problems with career and promotion opportunities could be another limitation. A third limitation was the inability to generalize the qualitative findings to all African American field grade and general officers, including those on active duty. As a retired African American field grade Military officer, I recall how my workplace relationships influenced my career opportunities. I minimized personal bias by staying aligned with the research question and problem statement and collecting sufficient and credible data to ensure trustworthiness.

Significance of the Study

This study is significant in that it fills a gap in understanding the experiences of African American veteran military officers for promotion and career opportunities and the influence of cultural or social workplace relationships on their career opportunities. Studies have shown that multicultural workplace relationships foster innovation and creativity and improve productivity and performance. This study showed a sample of African American veteran military officers' experiences with the lack of a sense of

belonging in their workplace relationships with equal opportunities, trust, and support for their career opportunities. Further, the findings show other factors contributing to the lack of African American military field grade and general officers. African Americans planning to pursue the military as a career could use the study's findings in navigating workplace relationships that influence career opportunities. From a social aspect, the findings may contribute to improved processes and procedures for multicultural workplace relationships that are equitable and inclusive of career opportunities. The benefits of this knowledge could extend beyond the military to federal agencies, private organizations, and institutions of higher learning. Human services and conflict managers could use the findings to conduct research and training on cultural and social workplace relationship awareness in the military. In turn, the findings could lead to improved accession and career opportunities for African American officers and provide knowledge for senior leadership to improve diverse and inclusive multicultural workplace relationships for more equitable senior-level opportunities.

Summary

A diverse, multicultural workplace is inclusive, with leadership valuing an equitable and just system that allows employees to bring their authentic selves and experiences while sharing the same career opportunities and respect. Employees tend to be more productive in organizations where they feel comfortable, supported, and appreciated. Workplace satisfaction is also associated with the trusting relationships built between employees based on shared values, beliefs, and cultural and social behaviors to support each other's visions and goals. The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore

African American veteran military officers' experiences with promotion and career opportunities and how their social and cultural relationships influenced those opportunities. The theoretical framework of workplace relationships is appropriate for exploring how relationships contribute to employee teamwork, inclusion, and organizational conflict. Workplace relationships develop amid in-groups, supporting members' best interests to include possible favoritism while limiting relationships with individuals outside their cultural or social groups with disparaging or biased behaviors.

I recruited a small convenience sample of African American veteran officers who served in the U.S. military in the grade of major or higher. The participants took part in semistructured interviews to discuss their experiences of promotion and career opportunities and whether their workplace, cultural, or social groups influenced their career opportunities. This study is significant because it fills a gap in understanding the experiences of African American veteran Military officers for promotion and career opportunities. Chapter 1 introduced the study, including the purpose, problem statement, and social implications. Chapter 2 presents the relevant literature, including the theoretical foundation and the research gap.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The underrepresentation of Minorities as senior leaders in the U.S. Military officer corps is a concern (McClellan, 2020). In a 1925 study, White male officers identified the lack of physical and mental capacity for African Americans to serve in leadership positions, which shaped the history of discrimination and inequity and the culture of the U.S. Military (Cooper, 2020). Although people of color made up 43% (1.3 billion) of U.S. Military personnel in 2019, White males comprised the majority of personnel making crucial operational decisions. African Americans comprised 23% of enlisted Military personnel yet represented 11% of the active-duty officer corps. According to *The Butler Report* (Butler, 1996), Military leaders had implemented policies and programs to create a more diverse and equitable Military branch. In 2008, minority officers and senior leaders significantly lagged behind their White counterparts (Windynski, 2020). In 2011, Military officers and civilian senior leaders developed a strategic plan to meet their vision of a well-diversified organization; in 2019, they created a chief of military diversity position to improve diversity and inclusion.

According to the Department of Defense (2021), the percentage of African Americans is significantly lower than Whites at the grades of lieutenant colonel and higher. Military leaders have acknowledged the disparity between Black and White officers, attributing low minority accession to educational level, job performance, and access to mentors. Few, if any, researchers have looked at the cultural or social workplace relationships associated with career opportunities (McClellan, 2020). There is

a need for additional qualitative research to understand African Americans' lived experiences of career opportunities in the military.

The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore African American veteran military officers' experiences with promotion and career opportunities and how their social and cultural relationships influenced those opportunities. I used Khawaja's (2020) workplace relationship framework based on key propositions related to the need for relationships with mutual benefits and trust. According to Khawaja's theory, relationships play a key role in organizational conflict, teamwork, and inclusion in professional life. Workplace relationship theory indicates the need for successful organizational relationships for employees to share benefits and stay engaged and for organizations to remain strong competitors (Khawaja, 2020). I also referenced Tajfel's social identity theory, which supports the theoretical framework of workplace relationships and explains the social behavior of workplace ingroups (Hogg, 2020; Tajfel, 1974).

Chapter 2 presents the literature review, beginning with the search strategy. I discussed the theoretical framework of workplace relationships, including its origin, use in similar research, appropriateness to study social groups' influence on career opportunities, and any relevance to managing systemic structural conflict. The chapter concludes with a summary and conclusion.

Literature Search Strategy

The search for information began with military sources, including the West Point Library, United States Military Human Resources Command, Defense Technical Information Center, and other Department of Defense databases and publications. The

primary sources searched were Thoreau, the Walden University Library, Google Scholar, the Directory of Open Access Journals, and ProQuest Dissertations. The initial search terms of *Military officer promotions*, *Military promotions* alone and with the Boolean operator *AND Military diversity and inclusion* produced a myriad of articles and studies related to promotions and career opportunities; however, I did not find any material related to the influence of social groups or workplace relationships on career opportunities. Adding the search words and phrases *workplace relationships OR work friendships*, *workplace conflict AND organizational OR human behavior in the workplace*, *workplace mentorship*, *cultural and social support*, *glass ceiling*, *workplace OR organizational trust*, *conflict*, *intrapersonal conflict*, *conflict management*, and *career development* produced more relevant yet still limited information on the influence of social groups on military career opportunities. These search terms provided access to peer-reviewed information about the social problem of the study. The underrepresentation of minorities in the military general officer corps and senior-level positions despite programs and policies to foster a diverse and equitable organization is a continuous concern (McClellan, 2020).

Theoretical Foundation

Khawaja's (2020) workplace relationships theory serves as the framework used to explore the experiences of Black veteran military officers. Khawaja identified workplace relationships as key to organizational and individual career success. Sias (2008) defined workplace relationships as the interpersonal engagement of supervisors, employees, coworkers, friends, clients, and customers. Numerous scholars have examined workplace

relationships about processes, production or mission results, and individual satisfaction (Li et al., 2020; Sias, 2008; Singh et al., 2022). However, I have not found research on how people report cultural and social groups' influence on career opportunities in the workplace. This study addressed whether participants had mentors from a specific culture or maintained social groups within the workplace on whom they depended for support or work success. Workplace relationships theory indicates employees' need for shared connections and trust in workplace relationships (Khawaja, 2020). Khawaja also identified employees' likelihood to progress in their careers more quickly when they are part of a trusted workplace relationship. Trust and inclusion are instrumental to workplace relationships. When organizations do not provide opportunities for relationship development, employees are often less productive and thus fail to meet the organization's goals (Khawaja, 2020). An individual component may play a role in workplace socialization, which could explain why African Americans may have different career results.

Workplace relationships theory (Khawaja, 2020) is an extension of Tajfel's (1974) social identity theory. It suggests that people base their sense of self on membership to specific cultural and social groups, including race, gender, religious preference, and family. Tajfel determined that individuals of a specific cultural or social group categorize others as part of their in-group (homogeneous) or an out-group (heterogeneous). Members of workplace in-groups share similar attitudes, behaviors, and characteristics. By interacting with their in-group, employees may show favoritism to their in-groups, having limited contact and understanding with out-group individuals

(Tajfel, 1974). Social identity theory provides a foundation for workplace relationships theory to explain why employees may perceive sharing their leaders' and managers' cultural or social groups can positively affect their career progression opportunities. Tajfel's theory also provides a lens into whether in-groups affect hiring, promotion, and reward selections (Piplani et al., 2022).

Khawaja (2020) conducted unstructured interviews with healthcare senior executives to explore workplace relationships and their effects on individuals' professional lives. Data analysis indicated five themes: (a) workplace relationships have a successful outcome when the rewards are mutually beneficial for the parties, (b) individuals want to be in committed and trustful relationships, (c) the development of a relationship is a career necessity when there are no better alternatives, (d) relationships need to be sustainable, and (e) trust leads to the belief that others in the relationship have good intentions. The themes are the key propositions of Khawaja's workplace relationships theory, which researchers have used to study the need for relationships at work and their impact on employees. The themes provide a foundation to explore the role of workplace relationships in organizational conflict, teamwork, inclusion, and career progression for all employees.

With the workplace relationships theory, Khawaja (2020) identified the need for employees to have a trusting workplace relationship that includes shared benefits and the ability to stay engaged and productive. In a related study, Hogg (2020) determined that individuals immediately assign others to specific cultural and social groups based on race, gender, religious preference, or other stereotyped characteristics that support

labeling outside groups. As a result, some employees feel excluded and unvalued. Hogg's version of social identity theory suggests that employees perceive that belonging to their leaders' and managers' cultural and social groups improves career progression opportunities. A combination of Khawaja's and Hogg's theories provided a lens into whether in-group favoritism can affect hiring, promotion, and reward selections and whether organizations should enact policies to minimize unacceptable behavior in workplace relationships.

Unlike Khawaja (2020), Hogg (2020) identified employees' ability to move between social and cultural groups whose members do not share similar values. Further, Hogg addressed how employees develop relationships with collaborative values and behaviors based on team performance, goals, and objectives. Individuals can use cultural humility to understand their values and beliefs and how they may need to adapt to a combination of cultures to achieve team or organizational success (Khawaja, 2020). Cultural humility entails balancing an individual's experiences, values, and beliefs with those of others, such as a history of abuse, oppression, or inequality of a race, gender, or religious group. For example, the historical reminders of slavery, segregation, or gentrification may lead African Americans to distrust White Americans. Cultural humility allows White Americans to empathize with African Americans and support workplace relationships that are inclusive of all employees. With cultural humility, individuals working as part of a collaborative effort can understand others' experiences and advocate for change.

Social identity theory addresses whether a lack of access to an in-group limits inclusion and causes favoritism, distrust, and conflict (Hogg, 2020). Individuals may hold conscious or unconscious biases or make hasty assumptions about a person based on prior experiences, causing unfair treatment or exclusion. To better understand the need for workplace relationships and their effect on career opportunities, I reviewed Khawaja's (2020) themes with the associated theories and how they support the theoretical framework of workplace relationships.

The first theme indicates the need to reward all employees similarly to promote successful outcomes (Khawaja, 2020). When leaders reward the entire team or organization, employees tend to be more collaborative and less competitive, which creates a less stressful environment (Kumari & Majumder, 2021). The members feel ownership, pride, and a sense of trust to contribute to the team's achievement. In providing team rewards, leaders encourage group members to unite in a common goal. According to Tran et al. (2018), an elevated level of collaborative workplace relationships, including team reward and work systems, increases cultural trust and cooperation. When employees share the results, whether reward or failure, there is a commitment to take ownership and do better, indicating the need for trusting relationships (Khawaja, 2020).

The second theme addresses the need for a trusted and committed relationship (Khawaja, 2020). The more commitment individuals perceive of others in the relationship, the better they want to perform and the more they want to invest in the relationship (Barroso, 2022). When individuals feel others' commitment to their success,

they want to reciprocate more (Friedman, 2021). According to Jungert et al. (2018), the members of high-performing teams share a strong need for satisfaction and autonomous motivation. High-performing team members regularly acknowledge the work or contribution of everyone, instilling a sense of pride, respect, and appreciation (Friedman, 2021). Organizational leaders recognize the need to train employees on the competence-supportive aspects of workplace teamwork to promote commitment and trust and improve individual and group processes and performances (Jungert, 2012). Some individuals fail to develop in-group relationships or prominent levels of commitment or trust despite training, in which case they invest the effort needed to excel personally on their own (Khawaja, 2020).

The third theme of Khawaja's (2020) theory is the need to develop a relationship when there are no better alternatives. Sometimes, individuals in the workplace do not make a social connection, whether physical, behavioral, or emotional (Holt-Lunstad, 2018). According to Holt-Lunstad (2018), a social connection can be a source of structural, functional, or quality support, with structural support referring to an individual's number and types of social networks. Functional support comprises resources or functions provided by relationships, and quality support pertains to the relationship's emotional connection and can be positive or negative. For example, an employee may feel disconnected or have little in common with other employees, leading to conflict, stress, or poor-quality relationships.

The fourth theme of workplace relationships theory relates to the need for sustainability in a relationship (Khawaja, 2020). Workplace stability is a significant

component of employee morale (Ali & Anwar, 2021). People working together for prolonged periods get to know each other's values and behaviors, which, when similar, facilitate a pleasant workplace. Workers stay with organizations for many reasons, including the camaraderie and stability of coworkers and building confidence or a dependable relationship with an individual, team, or organization (Zhu & Lo, 2022). For example, during the initial months of COVID-19, many employees lost the stability of workplace identity and the regular support of supervisors and coworkers, which could affect their well-being or cause feelings of depression or hopelessness. Individuals with stable workplace relationships can depend on others' support during low times (Zhu & Lo, 2022).

The COVID-19 pandemic led some individuals to reevaluate the need for a stable workplace or coworker connections and focus on career growth and more flexible employment, such as working from home (Fischer et al., 2023). Despite their workplace relationships, some employees switched employers to pursue better opportunities. Individuals focused on self-achievement and advancement may have coworkers question their intentions and commitment to the team.

The fifth theme focuses on whether trust enables the belief that others in the relationship have good intentions (Khawaja, 2020). According to Barroso (2022), trust-based workplace relationships can benefit all involved. Employees will likely be more committed when they trust their team or leadership to act in their best interest. Employees trust their coworkers have good intentions when they share knowledge for the betterment of the team or someone else's success and not their own (Kipkosgei et al., 2020).

However, this is not always the case. Sometimes, not sharing the same race, gender, or religious preference of the in-group or the senior-level managers could create unease about where the employee fits into the organization (Babic & Hansez, 2021). Systemic racial and gender discrimination occurs when organizations fail to provide equitable levels of diversity and have practices, policies and inbuilt work and social groups that intentionally or subconsciously limit career opportunities or provides a sense of exclusion to individuals outside of the in-group (Banaji et al., 2021). Historically, racial and gender discrimination through the biases of those in power kept marginalized groups from sharing the same rights and privileges (Banaji et al., 2021).

According to Roberson (2023), many people acknowledge that racism still exist, but believe it is less radical and combative and has manifested as racial microaggressions that stem from the stereotypes, cultural and social differences between interpersonal groups. A more recent term is modern racism because it is less blatant and sometimes difficult to identify. As an example, modern racism is the act of an African American woman not getting a promotion because she refuses to change her hair from its natural state or not hiring someone because their name is too difficult to pronounce and considering it to be too ethnic (Gaddis, 2017). There are many examples of racial and gender microaggressions that can create conflict within the workplace where there is group division and individuals refuse to work as a team. This can further lead to poor retention and performance for the organization and require leaders to develop conflict management plans to improve the work relationships of their employees. According to Brown (2019), the best way to bring work groups together and to discourage racial and

gender bias is to make individuals aware of their bias behavior, have the difficult or uncomfortable conversations about diversity and cultural differences, and finding allies, mentors or being ally or mentor (Brown, 2019).

For example, in an organization that has all White males at the senior level with a mentorship program where only White male participants are selected may provide a sense of distrust and possibly lead women and minority employees to question whether they are provided the same progression opportunities or whether there is a glass ceiling that separates them from their White male counterparts, providing them with an edge (Babic & Hansez, 2021).

The Glass Ceiling

A glass ceiling is an invisible barrier blocking the advancement of a qualified person (usually a woman) to a level of seniority through discrimination based on race or gender (Babic & Hansez, 2021). Glass ceilings are small and purposeful barriers or obstacles that hinder advancement. Breaking the glass ceiling occurs when a woman or other individual from a marginalized culture or social group becomes a CEO, high-ranking officer, or political leader, paving the way for fair and equitable opportunities (Tronto et al., 2020). Social injustices in 2020 significantly affected race, gender, and marginalized groups, leading to movements such as Black Lives Matter and #MeToo (Pandey et al., 2022). Political glass ceilings shattered with the first African American female vice president of the United States and the first African American woman appointed to the United States Supreme Court. Some Americans perceived these appointments as a political ploy to right social injustice by representing a marginalized

group (Chowdhury, 2023). For example, Vice President Kamala Harris has been the first woman of color many times throughout her career, yet the dynamics of equity and inclusion did not change for her as she advanced. Harris continues to face racism and sexism in a career dominated by White men (Coates Nee, 2022). Women comprise 51% of the U.S. population and 58% of the workforce yet hold only 35% of executive positions (United States Census Bureau, 2022; Zippia, 2022). This misalignment is also apparent for women and minorities in the U.S. Military. The first Military glass ceiling broke in 1979 when Hazel Johnson Brown became the first Black female general officer, and in 2001, when Claudia Kennedy became the first female three-star general officer. Despite these advancements, barriers and obstacles to equity and inclusion remain, especially when social and workplace relationships comprise indifference and cultural or social group underrepresentation (Gaikwad & Kalkar, 2020). According to Li et al. (2022), if organizational leaders facilitate employee relationships that support and empower workers' voices, employees will feel comfortable addressing issues such as gender discrimination, equity, and inclusion. Leaders can facilitate these relationships and support career progression by providing training, mentorship, and leadership opportunities.

Babic and Hansez (2021) studied career advancement through mentorship, informal connection with senior management, and a social relationship with the organization's decision-makers. The findings showed a lack of opportunities for mentorship for career progression. However, women believed that having a mentor would give them more promotion opportunities and a better chance of promotion.

Employees with a mentor or a social relationship with senior management felt included and well-informed on career opportunities. They believed that senior managers acted the same with all employees (Babic & Hansez, 2021).

Babic and Hansez (2021) also explored male senior managers' networking relationships and use of social connections to share information and career and promotion opportunities with employees. The findings show organization leaders overlook women in informal male networks and had fewer opportunities than their male peers, giving the perception of a glass ceiling.

The third concept relates to social relationships with the decision-makers. Babic and Hansez (2021) identified the need for employees to form social relationships with individuals of the same sex and similar backgrounds. Men develop a friendship bond with the organizational decision-makers. Babic and Hansez used the "Queen Bee Syndrome" to describe female managers in decision-making positions who fail to break glass ceilings for others, instead believing all women must work just as hard to reach their achievements (Gaikwad & Kalkar, 2020). These unhelpful actions create distrust in supervisors and individuals from similar cultural and social groups.

Zarankin and Kunkel (2019) examined the need for trust in workplace relationships to support commitment and positive career results, especially at the managerial level. The study showed that individuals with diverse cultures, values, beliefs, and social behaviors can affect an organization's in-group acceptance, especially for marginalized identities such as women, senior citizens, or people from minority races and cultures. Mulch (2015) identified two types of trust, basic and generalized, that impact

human well-being and social and economic development. Learned at an early age, basic trust can influence a child's social and emotional development and an adult's self-esteem and healthy interpersonal relationships (Maree, 2021). Mohammad and Stedham (2021) identified generalized trust as more cultural and found basic trust more connected with an individual's social groups and network experiences. Generally, there is a lack of trust between individuals of different social and cultural groups until they forge a common bond or connection.

Basic Trust in Workplace Relationships

Basic trust is an innate need guiding the development, nurturing, and improvement of social relationships. Basic trust can be a component of various workplace relationships, including supervisor–employee, mentor–mentee, and team member–peer (Dirks & de Jong, 2022). Using Erickson's theory, Maree (2021) found a connection between employee trust and the perception of individual or team workplace performance. Basic trust can vary depending on the workplace relationship. For example, a supervisor may have a perceived basic trust based on policies and office procedures over a coworker who opts not to support another employee to achieve personal gain (Maree, 2021). Early studies found increased work productivity and innovation from basic trust through social relationships in the workplace (Rawat et al., 2020). However, researchers held limited views of productivity based on social relationships at all levels and did not consider how diversity plays a role in the results. Had the studies shown productive social relationships at the lower levels of the organization, the results could prove more productive if the senior leadership mirrored the diversity and social culture of

its entry-level employees. More recent researchers define basic trust as an individual's decision to build a social relationship based on continuous interaction, shared duties, and personal contact (Rawat et al., 2020).

Basic Trust Relationships with Supervisors

According to Caldwell and Ndalamba (2017), trust begins with a basic concern for others and respect for their skill sets and contributions to the team or organization. Employees trust that supervisors will support their staff's care, commitment, and competence; supervisors trust that employees will dedicate themselves to meeting the organization's mission and goals (Rawat et al., 2020). Without the elements to form basic trust with a supervisor or employee, individuals will use generalized trust to develop workplace relationships.

Generalized Trust in Workplace Relationships

Generalized trust, also called spontaneous sociability, is people's trust in their team, community, or members of society. Generalized trust is a category-based trust that individuals use based on their association with that person's rank, title, or group affiliation (Rawat et al., 2020). Generalized trust allows individuals to move from a socially or culturally connected group to another group to gain access to better resources (Van Lange, 2015). For example, an African American employee may be more comfortable working on a team with other African Americans but may socialize with a group of White supervisors, holding a generalized trust in receiving career opportunities based on group association. Individuals who make alliances outside their cultural or social groups for the purpose of advancement are engaging in workplace politics (Fujino

et al., 2020). The perception of workplace politics and unbalanced career opportunities creates distrust and doubt in the system, the leadership, and coworkers. Despite research showing increased workplace diversity and inclusion based on gender, age, sexual orientation, and disabilities, there remains a gap in representation at the senior level at most large corporations and federal agencies. According to Fujino et al. (2020), morale and inspiration are greater when employees see individuals in similar cultural and social groups in senior leadership positions, thus encouraging an inclusive workplace. With generalized trust, employees' subconscious use of social intelligence threatens the development of social and networking relationships in the workplace. Social intelligence allows a person to assess others' trustworthiness based on their past experiences, what they know from social media, or observed nonverbal communication (Fujino et al., 2020). With generalized trust, individuals develop social relationships outside their natural connection and trust with their cultural or social in-group that benefit their career development (Cui et al., 2018).

Career Development Plans

Individual career development plans are increasingly important for organizations to maintain knowledge continuity and develop future leaders. Career development plans identify necessary training with short- and long-term goals to increase skills, knowledge, advancement opportunities, and succession planning (Niati et al., 2021). Whereas leaders focus on the skills and knowledge an employee needs to achieve the organizational mission or goals, employees concentrate on the skills and knowledge they need to meet their career objectives. Vondracek et al. (2019) found that young adults enter the

workforce with a lifespan development approach to career development, considering the timelines and overlap of school, family, and career opportunities (Niati et al., 2021). The best career development plans account for organizational requirements and employees' needs, indicating each party's contribution. Career development plans create professional knowledge, career progression opportunities, and give employees optimism and a drive to perform at their best (Vondracek et al., 2019). Developing a career plan may require workplace networking to help individuals who need additional support adjusting to unfamiliar environments and provide a culture of diversity or inclusion (Barhate & Hirudayaraj, 2021). Career development in an organization is dependent on a myriad of workplace relationships, including those with supervisors and peers; however, the chief responsibility is the individual's (Afiyati, 2018).

Employee Responsibilities in Career Development

Career development is an expectation of every employee and serves as motivation to achieve organizational productivity (Afiyati, 2018). Organizational leaders perceive career development as advancing employees to meet the organization's mission and plans. In contrast, employees define career development as receiving the skills and opportunities to progress toward individual goals that may be outside of the goals of the organization (Zhu & Song, 2022). By taking the initiative in their career development and knowing what they want to accomplish, employees hold organizational leaders accountable for creating individual development plans and providing opportunities to progress (Afiyati, 2018; Zhu & Song, 2022; Sturges et al., 2000). When employees believe there are limits on their training or career growth opportunities, they tend to have

low commitment, which impacts their productivity, perspective of the organization's culture, and trust that leaders have their best interests in mind (Zhu & Song, 2022).

Employees will match leaders' commitment, support, and energy levels to support an employee's career growth plan.

Organizational Responsibilities in Employee Career Development

To attract more diverse and uniquely talented employees and improve productivity, most organizations develop programs to train, develop individual skill sets, and reward high-performing employees (Jackson & Dunn-Jensen, 2021). Organizational heads recognize the need for internal leader development and succession planning to ensure business continuity as employees retire or change careers. According to Bashir et al. (2020), employees are more engaged and committed to their teams and the organization's mission when resources for career development are available. Employees who perceive positive support from their senior leadership are more likely to trust the workplace culture and commit to organizational success (Zhu & Song, 2022). Ji and Hong (2023) reviewed six hundred employees as mediators. The study found that supervisors' lack of transparency about career progression opportunities negatively affected the achievement of employees' psychological needs, including competence and relatedness in the workplace and the need for more CEO actions on behalf of women and marginalized groups.

Formal and Informal Mentorship

Mentoring can range from formal to informal, with formal mentors focused on career opportunities and informal mentors primarily on learning opportunities, such as a

new skill or understanding the team through interaction (Templeton et al., 2022).

Whereas both types incorporate a relationship to share knowledge and experiences, the commitment to and personal stake in seeing someone progress and achieve their potential is characteristic of formal mentoring. Supporting employees, especially women and minorities, professionally and personally through formal mentorship is crucial to their career development (Holcomb, 2021). Individuals transition more easily into organizations, are less anxious, and feel included when they trust that someone at the senior level prioritizes their work–life balance and career development (Godfrey & Benson, 2022). Formal mentorship allows leaders to protect employees from the “political and power differentials, racial and gender bias, and status disparities” (Espino & Zambrano, 2019, p. 459) inherent in some agencies. Employees perceive formal mentors to be more invested in their mentees’ well-being and goals than informal mentors or volunteer mentors in programs established by workplace leaders to achieve organizational effectiveness (Jackson & Dunn-Jensen, 2021).

Mandatory or Voluntary Mentorship

With the growing need for a more diverse and inclusive workforce at all organizational levels comes the need for mentorship to support the growth of a skilled, knowledgeable, and diverse employee selection pool (Blake-Beard et al., 2021). Most organizations support a voluntary program, with employees deciding whether to participate and likely to choose their own mentor. Studies show that when organizations provide volunteer mentorship programs, employees are less likely to participate due to a lack of connection or mentor diversity (Jiang et al., 2020; Campbell & Chrobot-Mason,

2022). Many health organizational administrators have developed mentorship best practices, with the senior leaders responsible for collaborating with employees and community stakeholders to create a successful, equitable, and sustainable program (Jiang et al., 2020). Jiang et al. (2020) limited their study to health organizations; thus, determining more generalizable best practices requires reviewing other agencies.

Summary and Conclusion

I searched Military websites and academic databases for literature on the theory of workplace relationships. The searches produced numerous studies related to the importance of workplace relationships built on basic and generalized trust and how the relationships may affect employees' commitment to their peers, their leadership, and the success of the organization's mission. The literature showed the connections of workplace relationships to career development and mentorship, especially for employees of marginalized identities or individuals subjected to barriers such as racism and glass ceilings. Some researchers identified the need for collaborative workplace relationships between senior leaders, employees, and the community or stakeholders to develop and support career development plans that meet organization, employee, and community goals. There was a gap in the literature related to career opportunities associated with cultural or social workplace relationships and whether such relationships are beneficial or detrimental to employees external to the social group. Chapter 3 presents the plan used for conducting the study, including the methodology, data collection, and data analysis to answer the research question.

Chapter 3: Research Method

The problem identified for this study is the underrepresentation of African American officers in US Military senior level positions (McClellan, 2020). The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore African American veteran military officers' experiences with promotion and career opportunities and how their social and cultural relationships influenced those opportunities. This chapter presents research design and methodology, including participant selection, data collection, coding, and analysis. Chapter 3 also includes the role of the researcher and ethical procedures to support the rights of participants.

Research Design and Rationale

This study is a means to answer two research questions:

RQ1: What are the experiences of African American veteran military officers as told through their stories about their career opportunities and promotions?

RQ2: What are African American veteran military officers' perceptions of the influence of cultural and social groups on their career opportunities?

In preparation for selecting a research design, I reviewed numerous qualitative approaches including narrative research, focused on exploring the life of one or more individuals, phenomenology; reviewing the lived experience shared by several individual, ethnography; describing and interpreting shared patterns of a group, and a case study; providing an in-depth understanding of a program or activity based on one or more cases (Tomaszewski, 2020; Yin, 1981). I chose to use a case study design because it allows me to conduct an in-depth review of the military's career development program from African

American veterans' experiences, including how they perceived their social relationships influenced their careers from an individual and comparison perspective (Tomaszewski, 2020). Crowe et al. (2010) described a case study as a design to describe, compare, and understand key aspects of a problem. Early uses describe case studies as exploring an event without changing relevant behaviors (Yin, 1981). Through individual case studies, I address the problem of the low number of African Americans promoted to senior-level positions in the military while exploring the findings and implications of the study. In addition, I used a case study design to explore in-depth retired African American military officers' experiences with cultural and social workplace relationships and how they individually perceived those relationships affected their promotion or career opportunities. I compared each individual case study's findings with previous scholarship attributing the small number of minorities in senior-level officer positions to African Americans' mediocre performance, limited qualification, or social, racial, and gender discrimination (e.g., Butler, 1995; Chivvis & Lauji, 2022; Cooper, 2021; McClellan, 2020).

Role of the Researcher

As the researcher, I served as the primary instrument by collecting, analyzing, and interpreting data to understand participants' views, experiences, and perspectives (see Wa-Mbaleka, 2019). Researchers acknowledge their biases and avoid personal experiences or relationships with participants to ensure data quality and trustworthiness (Stenfors et al., 2020). For transparency, I journaled any assumptions or biases about my experiences relative to the study and outlined a plan to minimize them, such as the use of

committee member reviews to help produce objective and trustworthy research (Tomaszewski, 2020). I avoided selecting friends and family members as participants as they were more apt to share my experiences and ideas. Not selecting friends and family also dispels the perception of flawed or biased research (Mays & Pope, 2020). Because I am a retired military Lieutenant Colonel with 27 years of experience as a human resources officer responsible for personnel actions related to awards, promotions, and job assignments, I had to set aside my experiences and preconceptions to become an objective researcher. I stayed aligned with the problem statement and used proper data-gathering techniques. As per Wa-Mbaleka (2019), I consulted with my dissertation committee in the initial stages of data collection and analysis to support the credibility of the data and the reliability and trustworthiness of the findings (Tomaszewski, 2020).

Methodology

Study Participants and Sampling Strategy

As the researcher, I recruited enough participants to explain the phenomenon and answer the research question (Ishak & Bakar, 2014). I used a purposive convenience sampling to choose qualified participants to explain their stories about a real-life phenomenon (Yin, 2011). Using purposive convenience sampling allowed me to use my judgment in determining the number and the best participants able to provide detailed information to meet the purpose of the study (Yin, 2011). I did not seek a large sample to generalize the results or use random sampling to avoid skewing the findings. Instead, I defined specific characteristics to narrow the pool of participants. Initially, I did not receive enough participants, so I used the snowball sampling, which entails asking

participants to recommend other possible participants with the same demographics and characteristics (Seawright & Gerring, 2008). The sample comprised six African American retired US Military field-grade officers between the ranks of major and colonel experiences for an in-depth understanding of the social or lived phenomenon (Yin, 2011).

Instrumentation

I was the primary instrument for data collection. I used an interview guide for step-by-step instructions for conducting the interview, including a list of open-ended questions I posed to each participant. Current research literature on diversity, inclusion, and military promotion and career opportunities for African Americans in the U.S. military served as a basis for the development of the interview questions. In drafting the interview questions, I also drew upon Khawaja's (2020) theory of workplace relationships and other studies (e.g., Butler, 1995; Chivvis & Lauji, 2022; Cooper, 2021; McClellan, 2020) related to why African Americans lag behind their White counterparts in senior-level officer positions. I tested the questions with my dissertation committee to identify any issues or adjustments needed to minimize confusion. Finally, I requested approval through the Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB) to recruit participants for my study to collect data. I covered the details of the IRB approval requirements in the Ethical Procedures section of this chapter.

Recruitment and Screening

After receiving IRB approval of the collection plan and soliciting participants, I used my social media (Facebook) and Walden University's Participant Pool Webpage to post an invitation flyer to recruit participants for my study. The flyer invited volunteers to

contact the researcher by email to express an interest in volunteering. I requested the University post the flyer for approximately a month or until I received the number of participants required for the study and did not require any additional cooperation. I did not identify any organizations in the publishing of this study. Once potential participants contacted me, I responded by email with the details of the purpose of the study. I asked them to confirm that they met the criteria for the study. I explained the process, intent, risks, and benefits of participation so they could decide to participate in the research. I used the words from Walden University's Consent Form in my email to gain their consent. Once they agreed to participate, I asked them to confirm their participation by responding to the email with the statement "I consent." I also requested that they select a date and time for their recorded interview based on a predetermined list sent in the email. The emails they sent are in a secure file with the researcher.

Procedures for Data Collection

I recorded the semistructured audio interviews with the participants via Zoom. I collected data from participants' interviews about their experiences with career and promotion opportunities and the influence of their Military workplace social and cultural groups on their career opportunities. I asked open-ended and narrative-style questions to allow participants to express their in-depth experiences. I used Zoom to record the audio interviews, each lasting approximately 45 minutes. After each interview, I thanked each participant, reminded them of the confidentiality of the data collected, and informed them of their ability to clarify or provide additional information should they think of other information relative to their experience for the study. I also let them know that I may

need to contact participants after the completion of the interview for clarification after I reviewed the recorded interviews, but it was not necessary. I set a deadline for submitting additional information to avoid receiving data after the data analysis phase of the study.

In addition to semistructured interviews, I requested artifacts from the participants, for insight into their experiences. The documents collected were related to published promotion and senior leader demographics and studies on diversity and equity in the Military during the terms of service for the participants. I informed the participants that I would solely maintain the recordings and artifacts on a USB flash drive in a locked file cabinet or on my password protected laptop and would destroy the recordings, transcribed text, and any collected artifacts five years after the completion of my study in accordance with Walden University's guidelines.

Data Analysis Plan

For my six qualitative case studies, I generated anonymous codes to identify the participants and their experiences (Yin, 2011). As part of the first phase of my data analysis, I developed precoders that included the development of labels that categorize the general experiences of the participants (Yin, 2011). The intent of precoding was to determine the development of patterns or themes within the data (Yin, 2011). I also coded any discrepancies or experiences that develop outside of themes and patterns relative to the data (Yin, 2011). I used Microsoft Excel to organize general characteristics and themes to include creating graphs for comparison and similarity of data. I also used the NVivo Data Analysis System to compare responses from the participants and to create line-by-line coding of similar words and phrases for titling and identifying emerging

themes and patterns. Once I completed the initial coding, I redefined my data from general to specific clusters and combinations and removed any unused categories. Lastly, I used selective coding to organize the data into core categories or central themes to describe the study topic (Yin, 2011). I identified patterns and connections between the collected data, documents, the interview questions and research questions.

Trustworthiness

Credibility

A study has credibility if it is believable, holds up to critical examination or scrutiny, and has data to support the findings (Morgan & Ravitch, 2018). One way to improve credibility is triangulation, in which researchers use multiple methods, sources, theories, or other analysts or researchers to validate or provide credibility to the study (Shenton, 2004). In this study, I conducted individual interviews, reviewed quantitative and qualitative literature related to the research questions and the lack of African Americans as senior Military officers, and collect government documents about minority promotions and senior-level opportunities during the timeframe the participants were on active duty. I noted references of published Military articles on the concern with diversity and equity within the Military during the interviews, especially at the senior level. Because researchers are responsible for data collection and analysis, readers should perceive them as credible and trustworthy (Shenton, 2004). The supporting documents along with the interviews of the participants provide credibility and dependability to the study.

Dependability

A component of trustworthiness, qualitative dependability correlates with quantitative reliability. Readers should be able to take the data, replicate the study, and produce equivalent findings. To ensure dependability, I made notes during the interviews and kept a research journal to reflect on the process. Dependability and reliability emerged from data coding, interview recordings, data triangulation, and peer review comparisons (Morgan & Ravitch, 2018). I employed triangulation with different data collection methods and used my committee chair and committee member to review the data and supervise procedures during the study. These practices ensured alignment with other studies within the same genre and context, thus lending dependability (Morgan & Ravitch, 2018). After collecting dependable data, I confirmed the data.

Confirmability

Confirmability in qualitative studies aligns with objectivity in quantitative research. To achieve confirmability, the researcher must be aware of biases and take steps to remain neutral in the study, presenting the findings based only on the data (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). I remained neutral by identifying my limitations and biases while designing the study and incorporating ways to mitigate risks to objectivity, such as journaling personal reflections throughout the process. As the researcher, I listened to and collected interview data on the participants' lived experiences of the specific phenomenon and not influencing them with my thoughts or opinions.

Ethical Procedures

Researchers must follow ethical standards and produce well-documented and trustworthy research. Before participant contact and data collection, I consulted Walden University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) for guidance and approval to conduct the study. I followed all IRB requirements for protecting the study participants by obtaining informed consent. The participants understood that participation was voluntary, and they could withdraw their participation at any time. I explained how I would use the information they provide and the protection of their identity and confidentiality by saving audio and text files using assigned pseudonyms, numbering Participant 1, 2, 3 and removing any identifying information from transcripts, data coding, and findings. Persons received the consent form with allotted time to review the purpose of the study and the requirements before asking more questions or responding to the email with "I consent." Once they agreed to participate, they signed the informed consent form and return it by email with the words, "I consent." The participants received information for a university contact should they have any concerns about the interview or the study. I recorded the audio interviews and transferred the recordings to text by Microsoft Word. I kept all recordings, transcripts, and participant provided documents on a password-protected personal computer and on USB flash drive that I stored in a locked file cabinet. In accordance with Walden University guidelines, I will manually erase and destroy all files five years after the completion of the study. I have sole access to the documents unless requested by the members of my dissertation committee. Each participant received a \$20 gift card in appreciation of their time and participation. Once I complete the study and the

university approves it for distribution, I will provide a 1-to-2-page summary of the study with the participants after completion of the study and approval for distribution and written at the Grade 6 reading level.

Summary and Conclusion

The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore African American veteran Military officers' experiences with promotion and career opportunities and how their social and cultural relationships influenced those opportunities. I reviewed numerous qualitative approaches and chose to use a case study design because it allows me to conduct an in-depth review of the Military's career development program from the experiences of African American veterans, to include how they perceived their social relationships influenced their careers. As the researcher, I served as the primary instrument by collecting, analyzing, and interpreting data to understand participants' views, experiences, and perspectives. Researchers acknowledge their biases and avoid personal experiences or relationships with participants to ensure data quality and trustworthiness. I used purposive (nonprobability) sampling to choose qualified participants, which allows a researcher to use a small and specific population to collect in-depth knowledge about a specific phenomenon. I used an interview protocol and guide, a researcher journal, and relevant Military articles, studies, and statistical reports to gather data, such as Military white papers and human resource reports on Military promotions, career development, and race and gender demographics for promotion and career opportunities for African Americans. I requested approval through the Institutional Review Board (IRB) to conduct my study and recruit participants for the collection of

related data. I developed a data analysis plan to organize and categorize the data to include the use of NVivo data analysis software to transcribe and organize unstructured data from interviews, surveys, and other documented sources. I recruited six African American veteran field-grade Military officers to participate in the study. I followed an interview guide to structure the process and maintain organization in the collection of data. As part of the data analysis, I conducted semi structured interviews, collected and reviewed participant-provided documents as validation of their experiences. I followed ethical standards and Walden IRB requirements for the protection of the participants by collecting informed consent and following a prescribed process to maintain confidentiality in the study to avoid any physical, personal, or psychological harm to participants. The following chapter outlines the results of collected and analyzed research data.

Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative multiple case study was to explore the experiences of African American veteran military officers with promotion and career opportunities, and how their social and cultural relationships influenced those opportunities. I conducted semi-structured interviews with six African American veteran Army field grade officers. I also analyzed artifacts in the form of documentation, military studies, and articles on promotions, mentorship, and workplace relationships published during the years the participants were eligible for field grade and senior-level positions. By doing so, I triangulated the data by comparing and cross-checking the information provided by the participants with data published during their time of service for confirmation, and consistency.

This study provides insight into the real experiences of African American Military officers, relative to the low number of African Americans promoted to senior-level positions in the Military and what they believed regarding the role of their cultural and social groups influence on their career opportunities.

In this chapter, I discuss the data collected and the results of the data analysis. The research questions guided the areas of data collection and analysis process for all the data collected. I describe the research setting to provide context for the study and offer insights from the collected data into the participants' career experiences. Additionally, I share the aggregate demographic characteristics of the participants. Finally, I cover the evidence of trustworthiness used to ensure that the data accurately represents the actual

experiences of these African American veteran military officers regarding their career progression opportunities.

Setting

The participants in this study each participated in an individual 45-minute audio interview via Zoom in the area of their home or office they selected to have a private conversation to avoid disturbance. I conducted Zoom interviews from my private home office space. I used the Zoom recording option and also used a recording app on my phone to ensure a backup recording. At the time of this study, the participants expressed no personal or organizational conditions that influenced their contributions to this research.

Demographics

I conducted a total of six individual case studies. All participants were African American retired U.S. Military field-grade officers, a male and female in each rank of Major, Lieutenant Colonel, and Colonel (Table 1). To ensure confidentiality, I used codes to identify the participants. An equal number of male and female participants participated in the study to assess whether gender influenced career opportunities as a social factor. I did not share any additional demographics to protect the confidentiality of the participants.

Table 1*Demographics*

Participant Code	Grade/Rank	Male/Female	Date of Interview
1MC	0-6/Colonel	Male	30 April 2024
2FC	0-6/Colonel	Female	1 May 2024
3MM	0-4/Major	Male	3 May 2024
4FLC	0-5/Lieutenant Colonel	Female	7 May 2024
5MLC	0-5/Lieutenant Colonel	Male	10 May 2024
6FM	0-4/Major	Female	12 May 2024

Note. Demographics from each of the six anonymous case studies

Data Collection

I recorded the individual semistructured audio interviews with the six participants via Zoom. The data collected from these interviews focused on their experiences with career and promotion opportunities, as well as the influence of their military workplace social and cultural groups on their career progression. I used open-ended and narrative-style questions to allow participants to express their experiences in depth. The questions aligned with the study's research questions, aiming to capture the career experiences of African American veteran Military officers and determine whether their cultural and social groups influenced their career opportunities. The interviews lasted between 30 to 47 minutes.

After recording all the interviews, I transcribed them into written text for data analysis. To ensure the ethical protection of the participants, I followed the guidelines and obtained approval from Walden University's Institutional Review Board (IRB). This process included securing informed consent from the participants. Each participant received a Walden IRB-approved invitation to participate via email. Following each interview, participants received a \$20 Visa gift card as a thank-you for their participation,

as stated in the invitation to participate. I did not have any unusual incidents during the collection of data.

Data Analyses

I reviewed all the transcriptions manually and compared them to the audio recordings to correct any information that was inaudible or inaccurately transcribed. Once I completed all the transcriptions, I began the manual coding process, using the text, audio, and video data collection, also known as non-numerical data, to isolate and identify the participants' experiences (Yin, 2011). I also collected and analyzed published quantitative data collected on the diversity of promotions and senior-level positions through issues and decision letters published by the Military Leadership Diversity Commission (MLDC) using content analysis (Table 2). I also collected additional cross-referencing data from case studies and reviews published by senior officers related to the lack of minority promotions and assignments to senior-level positions (Table 2). Finally, I reviewed articles and numerous case studies on mentorship and workplace relationships to support the triangulation of the data provided by the participants (Table 2 and 3).

Table 2

Data Sources:(Artifacts, Documents and Articles Used for Cross Referencing)

Source	Title	Reference
Diversity Equity and Inclusion Annex	Army's Diversity Roadmaps initiated in 2011 and revised with the Army's (DEI) Strategic Plan through 2025	Army People Strategy (2020) Diversity Equity and Inclusion Annex. Assistant Secretary of the Army, Manpower and Reserve Affairs
Journal of Military, Veteran and Family Health (2022).	23 Articles reviewed on the Mentorship for Women in the Military	Tam-Seto, L., & Imre-Millei, B. (2022). Scoping review of mentorship programs for women in the Military. (Cultural bias)
Military Psychology Journal (2022)	Need for a more formal career development program for junior officers	Siew, D. H. K., & Koh, J. H. L. (2022). Being andbecoming beginning Military leaders: Implications for leadership learning. <i>Military Psychology</i> , 35(2), 142–156. https://doi.org/10.1080/08995605.2022.2088986
Doctoral dissertation, Northeastern University	Disparity of Black officers' promotions and senior level positions	McClellan, B. J. (2020). <i>Disparity in Black officer promotions: A survey of implicit racial Attitudes among US Military officers</i> (Publication No. 28023855) [Doctoral dissertation, Northeastern University]. ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global.
Army University Press	Low number of minorities promoted to senior level and the need for diversity as a strategic asset.	Garrett, M. (2021). Military Diversity: A key American strategic asset. <i>Army University Press</i>

In my initial review of the transcripts, I used manual coding and identified recurring words or phrases across the six interviews. The descriptions included references to people, job positions, locations, and events, as well as the beliefs, perceptions, or experiences associated with these terms (Yin, 2011). I used the study framework and the research questions to guide the development of the codes. I categorized similar codes to provide themes, which represent the major components used to describe the results of the data collected, the general experiences, the discrepancies between the participants, or the information gathered through the literature review (Yin, 2011).

I managed the categorization, coding, labeling, and defining of the primary patterns of information using Microsoft Excel and then moved to software support using NVivo (Elliot, 2018). Through the analysis, I identified a total of 27 open codes (see

Table 3). These codes emerged from the data across all transcripts and were grouped into the following themes: (a) mentorship is needed for leadership development, (b) military officers must take personal initiative in professional development and job opportunities, (c) junior officers set personal career aspirations, (d) limited guidance and not having a career plan hindered career progression, (e) cultural and social groups influenced job opportunities, and (f) perceived strong connections with peers and senior leaders that shared cultural and social groups. Additionally, I looked for discrepancies in the participants' experiences but found none

Table 3

Themes: Regarding African American Veteran Military Officers' Experiences of Career Progression and the Perception of Cultural and Social Group Influence

Themes	Codes	Participants' Quotes
Mentorship needed for leadership development.	Attribution of success at each grade held; <i>Continued work with African American mentors; and Emulating role models</i>	"Having the mindset, I guess you can say. Learning from people's mistakes and then learning from people's successes." "I deployed to Bosnia, learned my craft, and learned then what I would say is sometimes it's who you know and who you chose to use as your mentor, or who you request to become your mentor." Formal mentors back then, not in the sense that I think that's used now, but just people that that that you know, or that I either saw and wanted to emulate or saw me and wanted to help me move forward and gave me some recommendations to do that.
Military officers must take personal initiative in professional development and job opportunities.	<i>focus on the work; learning through assignments; self-advocacy; taking self-development opportunities; and taking the hard jobs</i>	"Never tried to manipulate assignments or asked anyone to help me get a job, I just took whatever they gave me, and I worked as hard as I could." "I needed to be very aggressive and agile in moving forward and not waiting for somebody to come and hand me anything." "Take all the professional development courses you can and take the tough assignments and do well and get the good evaluations out of those jobs and it will look highly favorable by the people who sit on the promotion boards." "Decide to take those tough assignment like going to an Infantry Division or going overseas where you may not like the environment or the living conditions but will help build your career in the long term."
Junior officers set personal career aspirations	<i>surpassed career aspiration rank; progression on par with peers; and worked harder than peers</i>	"I set my goal to make it to the rank of Lieutenant Colonel and retire in 20 years because I felt that if I made a 20 year retirement that showed that I did everything the Army asked me to do...and then when I got promoted to Colonel, I thought I worked my tail off to get to that rank and I was thankful I did" "I was right on course with promotions as an officer throughout my entire career, meaning when my year group met its primary selection criteria. I was then promoted with my peer group." "That was the time when I realized, I got to work harder than everybody else, and even some of my Associates would tell me that I worked way too hard."
Limited guidance and not having a career plan hindered career progression.	<i>aspired rank not reached; lack of guidance a limiting factor; no rank aspirations; politics hindered motivation to continue; and praised but not promoted</i>	"My career aspirations were to go as far as I could go...a general in the United States Army...but maybe I wasn't in the right place at the right time...did everything I could do." "It's not going to just fall in your lap, you have to do something to influence somebody or inquire about it...be on the offense." "My career aspirations in the Military were to do a number of years, pay my bills off and get out." "I was shooting for Lieutenant Colonel, but when I saw how political things were on the officer side...and how all the white Colonels played a part where they didn't like you, they would get rid of you or put you in an assignment where you really can't progress." "I was told not once, not twice, but three times while you have performed stellar. I cannot give you the top block (performance rating)."

Table 3 cont.

Themes: Regarding African American Veteran Military Officers' Experiences of Career Progression and the Perception of Cultural and Social Group Influence

Themes	Codes	Participants' Quotes
Cultural and social groups influenced job opportunities	<i>disadvantaged with race-based grooming-promotion; increased comfort around other African American; lack of participation in groups means less opportunity; social belonging aids progression; and worked around social grouping</i>	"I've seen how Caucasian colonels would groom Caucasian officers and wouldn't really care about the African American or the other officers that were not Caucasian." "What attracted me to stay in the Army or come back over to the Army side from the Air Force was more African Americans in the Army." "I affiliated not just with my social group, that I'm comfortable with, but with other social groups too... because that's where stuff was discussed, such as the golf course and officers club and those officers and friends of mine that did not participate had different experience... don't know if I can say that was the reason but you would missed out on opportunities when you were not amongst that other group socializing with them." "As long as there's some senior officers in those groups, make sure you get involved in those groups to help you obtain the visibility that you need to advance to the next level." "Keep your friends close, keep your enemies closer, so that you can make sure they're not doing anything against you... you just watch them; know who you are who you're dealing with and ensure they're not getting away with anything."
Perceived strong connections with shared cultural and social groups by senior leaders.	African American mentoring group: cliques present; little social interaction with leadership; observation of targeting-favoritism; professional development gatherings; and senior officers present in cultural group	"ROCKS are an organization. founded by African American officers to help mentor, coach and lead other African American officers in the Military." "Overseas, it seemed like we were all in the same group, when we were stationed in the states, it always seemed to be divided in little cliques, them versus us types of things going on." "I had assignments where I didn't see my senior leaders, or I didn't know who they were." "I saw a lot of nepotism, people would get jobs and opportunities because they went to college or graduates of the same academy of the senior leader, showed me that the best officers didn't always get the job." "Every now and then, my senior leader would have professional development get-togethers like once a quarter; really the only opportunity to get together with a lot of my peers as an opportunity for us to talk and give awards to people who were leaving from the organization or introduce the new folks who were coming to the organization." "You gravitate to different groups and most of mine were cultural type and in align with the groups that I had an affiliation to during my upbringing... a lot of senior officers of my cultural group aligned with my social fraternity... once they realize you're one of them, they will hold you accountable and help you to ascend you to the next level."

Evidence of Trustworthiness

In qualitative research, trustworthiness is paramount to ensure the integrity and validity of the study. Trustworthiness allows for generalizable results to a population with similar demographic characteristics, specifically African American veteran Army officers in this case. Generalizability is key for the applicability and relevance of the study's findings to similar contexts and groups. The criteria for establishing trustworthiness include credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, as outlined by Korstjens and Moser (2017). In addition to six participant case studies, I reviewed and compared military artifacts and documents relative to each case study I conducted to provide evidence of trustworthiness (Table 3).

Credibility

Credibility in qualitative research is essential to ensure that the findings accurately reflect the participants' experiences and perspectives. Techniques used to enhance the credibility of the research included spending sufficient time with participants to build trust and understanding of the context of their experiences, known as prolonged engagement. Secondly, as a review of multiple case studies, I used the triangulation strategy that includes the validation of data through the use of several data sources. For this study, I used previous government studies on minorities in senior-level positions in the federal government, Military journals and articles on military promotions to include current demographics, and theoretical frameworks on workplace relationships, and six individual case studies to cross-check the data and findings on the phenomenon of the

influence of cultural and social groups on career opportunities. As part of the data analysis, I did not require participants to review the transcripts to confirm the accuracy, but I did share the unrevised transcripts with the first chair of my committee. In hindsight, by allowing participants to review the transcripts would have provided additional confirmation of accuracy, However, I used the critical steps to achieving credibility by ensuring the participants met the requirements for the study to provide an accurate perspective and that the interviews were properly recorded and transcribed in accordance with my data collection plan to include the triangulation of other military artifacts, case studies and supporting documentation to maintain data integrity (Table 3).

Transferability

Transferability in qualitative research refers to the extent to which the findings can apply to other contexts or settings (Drisko, 2024). To enhance transferability, I provided multiple descriptions from the collected data to allow others to determine if the findings are applicable to their own situations. Drisko (2024) describes transferability as the ability to apply study results to broader contexts while maintaining context-specific richness. As an example, I provided a detailed description of the interview sessions with the participants to help others understand the context and determine if their settings are similar enough for the findings to be applicable (Drisko, 2024). By ensuring that participants met specific criteria and including pertinent details about the participants' profiles in the study offered insight into who they are and helps others see if their populations are comparable. I included direct quotes from the participants to allow readers of the study to hear the participants' voices and give detailed understanding to

their perspectives and experiences, which adds richness and depth to the data. Finally, providing detailed descriptions of DoD and military policies and procedures, artifacts on military demographics to promotions and career development helped ensure the findings are relevant to similar organizations. Applying all of these strategies collectively help others evaluate whether the findings of the study can be transferred to other contexts, thereby enhancing the external validity or transferability of the study.

Dependability

Dependability focuses on the stability of data over time. You can achieve dependability through an audit trail, which records all the research steps and decisions as part of a study. As demonstrated in this study, I ensured the data collection, and the methodology used to ascertain viable information was logical, traceable, and documented. To ensure dependability, I followed the step-by-step process discussed in the research methodology section in Chapter 3. I used an interview guide and conducted semi structured interviews with each of the six participant case studies. I conducted each interview via Zoom communication software to record the interviews. I also used a back-up external device for audio recording to ensure I captured the accuracy of the details of the interviews. I used Microsoft Word transcribing feature to transcribe the audio recordings. I used the NVivo Data Analysis System to compare the responses in the transcripts to create line-by-line coding of similar words and phrases for titling and identifying emerging themes and patterns. I used Microsoft 365 to organize general characteristics and themes to include creating graphs and tables for comparison and similarities of data. I took notes during and after each interview to document my

observations to the participants' interviews to capture similarities, differences and possible recommendations for the results of the study.

Confirmability

Confirmability is the development of the findings by the participants and not the predisposition or interest of the researcher. To enhance the confirmability of the data, I used reflexive journaling and triangulation to maintain impartiality and objectivity. Journaling kept me mindful of my personal experiences and beliefs throughout the data collection and analysis process. As a veteran African American Military Officer, I had my own experience with the influence of social and cultural groups on career opportunities. My journaling kept me cognizant of my experiences to include those that I shared with each participant and those experiences that were different. According to Billups (2021), self-questioning and self-understanding demonstrate the practice of reflexivity and are common strategies that support trustworthiness. Documenting my biases and beliefs created confirmability, ensuring that the study results reflected the participants' views rather than those of the researcher. Confirmability addresses the study's objectivity. I remained objective in the data analysis, utilizing software such as Microsoft Office and NVivo to assist in sorting, categorizing, and identifying frequently mentioned codes. This technique helped me refrain from including personal biases in the data analysis. By implementing these mechanisms, I ensured the findings were trustworthy.

Results

The results of this study provide the experiences of six participants through individual case studies, all of whom were veteran African American Army field grade officers. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed to written data. I used two forms of recording to ensure accuracy of the information provided by each participant. During the interviews, each participant shared their experiences with promotion and career opportunities and how their social and cultural relationships influenced those opportunities. I identified six themes in the analysis of the six individual case studies using an open, axial, and selective coding process as previously discussed. Research Question 1: What are the experiences of African American veteran Military officers on promotions and career opportunities?

Four themes aided in the response to question. The first theme was the need for mentorship and a social relationship with senior leadership. This theme emerged from the three codes: (a) *attribution of success at each grade held*, (b) *continued work with African American mentors*, and (c) *emulating role models*. The codes identified under this theme reflected the need for mentorship and a social relationship with senior leaders or supervisors to stay connected for job opportunities and promotion opportunities. According to Babic and Hansez (2021), employees that lack mentorship, feel left out and may carry an unfavorable view of career progression compared to those employees in the same study that had a mentor or a social relationship with senior management, shared a feeling of inclusion and felt well-informed on career opportunities. Participant 3MM provided support to this finding by stating, “what made me successful, was just following

the ones who were looking out for my career.” Participant 5MLC, stated that, “sometimes it's who you know and who you chose to use as your mentor, or who you request to become your mentor. In a study of the career ascension of African American senior warrant officers, the African American participants that made it to the senior grade gave credit it was to formal mentorship from African American and non-African American senior officers for their accomplishments through guidance and job opportunities (Williams, 2019). Participant 5MLC also states, “promoting to the field grade ranks is who you know and your personality of fitting amongst people that you are going to be working with at those grade levels.” Participant 2FC shared, “I don't think I would call them formal mentors back then, people that you know, or that I either saw and wanted to emulate or saw me and wanted to help me move forward and gave me some recommendations to do that.” According to a 23-article review of mentorship in the military, an individual's background, culture and beliefs are factors in the preference in mentorship as individuals tend to engage with those that share the same cultural and social groups (Tam-Seto & Imre-Millei, 2022). With the lack of a mentor or social relationship with senior leadership, the participants shared their experiences of taking the initiative to develop and pursue their own career opportunities.

The second theme of support was Taking personal initiative. This theme emerged from five codes: (a) *focus on the work*, (b) *learning through assignments*, (c) *self-advocacy*, (d) *taking self-development opportunities*, and (e) *taking the hard jobs*. The codes identified under this theme reflected how in the absence of a mentor or social relationship with a senior leader, participants attempted to create their own career plans,

goals and looked for their own professional opportunities. As an example, Participant 2FC shared, “my skill sets, my people skills, hard work, and really wanting to be the best that I could be had a lot to do with my success.” Participant 5MLC stated, “nothing I did specifically was better or greater, it was just that I was an average officer at that particular time, learning as I go in the different organizations to which I was assigned.” Participant 4FLC stated, “I needed to be very aggressive and agile in this and moving forward in it and not wait for somebody to come and hand me anything, and not stepping on anybody, but to do what was right and move forward in my career if I wanted to get it.” Participant 1MC suggested individuals “take all the professional development course that they can even if they are correspondence courses and take all the educational classes to help you get extended degrees like a master’s or even a PhD.” Participant 1MC also recommended officers “take those tough assignment like going to an infantry division like the 2d Infantry Divisions in Korea or the 82d Airborne at Fort Bragg or going overseas you can take those assignments where you might not like the environment or the location you live in but will help you in the long term.” Although in each case study, the participants shared their experience with personal initiative in their career development, a decision paper provided by the Military Leadership Diversity Commission determined that minorities lacked knowledge of the promotion system and the job requirements due to the absence of mentorship or explanation by senior leadership (MLDC, 2011). The decision paper identifies the imbalance of promotions on organizational and personal bias by senior leaders. As an example, they shared the need to place minorities in positions of recruitment and equal opportunity assignments, that defer them from the track for senior

level positions shared by those on an operational or combat arms track (MLDC, 2011).

The recommendation was for the Military to put policies and education in place to give minorities placed in special requirement jobs the same level of consideration as the officers that have served on the normal or combat arms track (MLDC, 2011). In addition to taking personal initiative, participants shared their personal career aspirations which lead to the third theme.

The third theme was Setting personal career aspirations. This theme emerged from the three codes: (a) *surpassed career aspiration rank*, (b) *progression on par with peers*, and (c) *worked harder than peers*. Participant 1MC noted, “I set my goal to make it to the rank of Lieutenant Colonel and retire in 20 years because I felt that if I made a 20 year retirement that showed that I did everything the Army asked me to do...I knew I was excellently doing the right thing at that time to well and then when I got promoted to Colonel, I thought I worked my tail off to get to that rank and I was thankful I did.” In a similar study on the Career Ascension of African American Men in the Army Warrant Officer Corp, it was individuals from their cultural and social backgrounds (teachers, parents, coaches, etc.) that aspired their career occupations (Williams, 2019). Williams (2019) also shared that in many a case, the person that inspired the participants were non-African American and supporting the need for more literature on early mentorship for career development. According to Participant 2FC stated, “I was on par with my peers, but I felt my start was slow because I felt by myself at my first station, I was the only female, the only Black, and the only Lieutenant among a bunch of Noncommissioned Officers.” Participant 5MLC had a similar response, “I never got promoted ahead, which

we would call, below the zone. I always was promoted with my peer group.” Participant 3MM commented, “I honestly can tell you I had to work harder and do a lot of things different than the Caucasian officers.” Participant 4FLC also summarized how working with men transferring from the combat arms fields to the personnel services field, “competition got a little harder, so for me as a personnel officer, with a math background, I had to stay with the infantry type units and take the hard jobs in order to stay competitive.” While all of the participants had aspirations, only one of the six participants shared the career goal of becoming a general officer. However, all of them shared experiences they perceived hindered their career progression.

The fourth theme was Hinderance to Career Progression. This theme emerged from the five codes: (a) *aspired rank not reached*, (b) *lack of guidance a limiting factor*, (c) *no rank aspirations*, (d) *politics hindered motivation to continue*, and (e) *praised but not promoted*. Participant 4FLC stated, “I actually wanted to be a general, and thought if I didn't get in any trouble or didn't have any black marks, I would make it, but as time went on, maybe I wasn't in the right place at the right time, but I believe I did everything. I could do.” Participant 2FC noted, “What do I need to do to get the high visibility jobs, and I realized that it's going to happen for me like it seems to happen for the others, I have to do something to influence somebody to give me the same opportunities.” Participant 6FM said, “my career aspirations in the Military, was to do a number of years, pay my bills off and get out of the Military, but with every move, I was encouraged to make the most of this and became strategic in regard to the assignments that I took.” Participant 3MM summarized, “I was shooting for Lieutenant Colonel, but when I saw

how political things were on the officer side, how we had this thing called the Council of Colonels and all of them were White and those Colonels played a part of where every Major would go and if they didn't like you, they would get rid of you and put you in an assignment that you really could not progress.” Participant 1MC discussed surpassing aspirations, “I set my goal to make it to the rank of Lieutenant Colonel and retire in 20 years...I did everything the Army asked me to do...I was excellently doing the right thing at that time, and I got promoted to Colonel.” Participant 1MC exceeds set goal and refers to excellently doing everything right, but still not receiving the promotion to the general officer level. This leads to the question of whether there is an influence of cultural or social groups on career opportunities to senior level positions.

Research Question 2: What are African American veteran Military officers’ perceptions of whether their cultural and social groups influenced their career opportunities? Two themes evolved from the data analysis to respond to the question. The first theme was cultural, and social groups influence on job opportunities. This theme emerged from five codes: (a) *disadvantaged with race-based grooming for promotion*, (b) *increased comfort around other African American*, (c) *lack of participation in groups means less opportunities*, (d) *social belonging aids progression*, and (e) *worked around social grouping*. Participant 3MM stated “Caucasian Colonels would groom Caucasian officers and wouldn't really care about the African American or the other officers that were not Caucasian. Participant 3MM also provided an example of how the senior leadership “move a White female peer to positions to raise her to a higher level than the rest of us... she was getting counseling on what she could do to be better, while we were

sitting back trying to figure it out.” Participant 6FM shared similar comments by all social and cultural groups helping their own and stated, “I do believe that white folks are doing the same thing as we are doing, the difference is they have a far greater advantage because they are in higher positions.” Participant also gave an example of a discussion with a White male peer, “I’ll never forget I listened to this guy who only joined the Military to continue the lineage of his family of officers and I expressed to him. I don’t know who the hell my grandfather is, so I don’t have that advantage.” Participant 1MC shared how he inserted himself in other cultural and social groups for recognition, “if you didn’t associate a lot of those groups, you didn’t get a chance to be around the people who were the senior leaders in those groups. I played a lot sports, so I had a lot of a chances to be around senior leaders from other social groups and when you work for them as long as you do the best for them, in that job, they see that you are that type of officer to hold yourself up well, and that’s what worked for me.” Participant 2FC shared a similar response of participating in groups outside of personal cultural and social groups, “I affiliated not just with my social group, that I’m comfortable with, but with other social groups too, just so I can be seen in our big organization amongst our signal leaders.” The participant provided examples of types of social groups, “You wanted to be involved in the officers’ club, which played a huge role as a young Captain and for Black people because that’s where stuff was discussed, at the golf course and those officers and friends of mine that did not participate had a different trajectory.” Participant 5MLC commented on the advantages of socializing in other groups, “Pros of social groups are you get to know the who’s who at the senior levels. As long as there’s some senior officers in those

groups, make sure you get involved in those groups to help you obtain the visibility that you need to advance to the next level.” Participant 4FLC discussed not necessarily getting to know other social groups, but staying engaged to watch their actions, “Keep your friends close and your enemies closer, so that you can make sure they're not doing anything against you, and they know that they see you... You know who you are who you're dealing with and that they're not getting away with anything.” Of the six participants, only three shared their experiences with taking the initiative to participate in social groups outside of their own to stay connected and to increase their career and promotion opportunities. The same three participants received consideration or selection to the grade of Colonel. All six shared the lack of senior leadership and peers of their selected cultural or social groups throughout their careers, but specifically during the early stages of their careers and the need for a connection to senior leadership with shared cultural and social values and beliefs.

The second theme evolved from the cases of a perceived strong connections with shared cultural and social groups by senior leaders. This theme emerged from six codes: (a) *African American mentoring groups*, (b) *presence of cliques*, (c) *little social interaction with leadership*, (d) *observation of targeting favoritism*, (e) *professional development gatherings*, and (f) *senior officers' presence in cultural and social groups*. Participant 2FC shared an experience of learning about an African American Mentorship group at mid-career, “ *The ROCKS* is an organization founded by African American officers to help mentor, coach and lead other African American officers in the Military, so it was a great source in terms of learning what you need to be doing, how to

assimilate in an organization and networking was sort of what I benefited from up until that point, I just. I didn't know what I didn't know, like if you have any questions or concerns about your performance appraisal, you can challenge it.” Participant 6FM also shared knowledge about the ROCKS, “My boss at the time was the highest black chemical officer and he literally had me seek out every officer of color to make sure he went over their documentations to make sure they were educated on what they needed to be as competitive as our counterparts who didn't look like us, Caucasians.” Participant 4FLC shared a difference in social grouping overseas versus in the United States, “When we were overseas, it always seemed we were all together, everyone in the same group, but seemed like when we were stationed in the states, it always seemed to be a little divide, little cliques; them versus us.” Participant 2FC share, “I had assignments where I didn't see my senior leaders, or I didn't know who they were other than by name or a picture on the wall, and then I saw leaders as a Major and the only Black and only female in some situations where they knew I was there, and they didn't mistreat me, but they didn't do anything above and beyond to coach or mentor, me or give me anything that I didn't try to get myself. Participant 2FC provided an example, “I would see the other officers in social settings, like the Officer's Club for lunch and say, should I feel bad because I wasn't invited or they were in the mess hall sitting together and I didn't know how to merge that stuff together, so I felt a little bit out of the loop when those things happened and felt I wasn't getting that same sort of counseling and training from my senior leaders. Participant 1MC commented on nepotism by senior leaders and stated, “I saw people get jobs and opportunities because of where they went to college or

graduates of the same academy the senior leader was a graduate of, and those opportunities showed me that the best officers didn't always get the job." There were some senior leaders that provided general guidance to their staff. Participant 1MC provided an example by stating, "Most Military officers would have gatherings every now and then where you get together as a group and senior leaders would provide professional development...much those things changed from the time I was a second lieutenant to when I became more senior in the Military but that was really the only opportunity that I saw that I was able to get together with a lot of my peers." Participant 5MLC commented, "Because of your personality, you gravitate to different groups and most of mine was more of a cultural type and in align with the groups that had an affiliation to my upbringing, my background and my culture."

Summary

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore six African American veteran Army officers' experiences with promotion and career opportunities and how their social and cultural relationships influenced those opportunities. The study participants shared their experiences, perceptions, and thoughts on career progression in the Military and the influence of workplace social and cultural groups on their opportunities. The information collected from semi-structured interviews provided a better understanding of the challenges of progressing to the senior level in the Military as minority officers and the role that mentorship and workplace relationships play in career development and promotion opportunities. I identified six themes in the analysis of the participants' responses to the interview questions and included the Need for mentorship for leadership

development, Military officers must take personal initiative in professional development and job opportunities, Junior officers set personal career aspirations, Limited guidance and not having a career plan hindered career progression, Cultural and social groups influenced job opportunities, and Perceived strong connections with shared cultural and social groups by senior leaders. The data analysis indicated a need to develop career plans with junior minority officers with formal and informal mentors to support career navigation, to include assistance with job and promotion opportunities.

In Chapter 5, I analyze and interpret the findings through the lens of the literature reviewed in Chapter 2, as well as the conceptual framework established. This comprehensive approach allows for a thorough understanding of the results, providing a basis for practical recommendations and future research directions. I provide the implications for positive social change, with a focus on how the study's findings can enhance career and promotion opportunities for Military minority officers.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Introduction

The low number of African Americans promoted to senior-level positions in the military led me to review the literature on the following problem. While programs and procedures have been put in place to increase the military's minorities and women across all grades within the officer's corps, they remain below their White male officers and their national percentage in military senior-level positions for multiple decades (McClellan, 2020). While research has proposed the importance of social relationships for advancement and promotion, I have not found qualitative studies that explore the experiences of African American officers and their social relationships and the influence their workplace social relationships have on their career progression.

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore African American veteran Military officers' experiences with promotion and career opportunities and how their social and cultural relationships influenced those opportunities. In this chapter, I interpret the findings, address the limitations of the study, make recommendations for future research in this area, and discuss the implications for social change.

Interpretation of the Findings

In this section, I interpreted the findings and added to the body of knowledge as it relates to the experiences of African American veteran officers with military career opportunities and the influence of cultural and social groups on their career opportunities. The conceptual framework and the literature review helped me to interpret my findings.

Findings and the Literature

My intent was to answer two research questions:

RQ1. What are the experiences of African American veteran Military officers on promotions and career opportunities?

RQ2. What are African American veteran Military officers' perceptions of whether their cultural and social groups influenced their career opportunities?

The findings of this study are from the perceptions of the participants' experiences with career and promotion opportunities and their workplace social interactions with those that may have an influence on their career opportunities. The data analysis was from the narratives provided by the participants during the audio interviews and documents collected from the literature review to provide triangulation of the data for the validity and trustworthiness of the findings from the data analysis. Six themes emerged from the data: (a) mentorship needs for leadership development, (b) personal initiative in professional development and job opportunities, (c) junior officers set personal career aspirations, (d) limited guidance and not having a career plan hindered career progression, (e) cultural and social groups influenced job opportunities and (f) perceived strong connections with shared cultural and social groups by senior leaders. The responses by all six participants were consistent with the lack of mentorship and social interaction that causes individuals to work harder to compete and provides a feeling of social isolation (Bristol, 2020).

As part of the data analysis process, I used the theoretical framework of workplace relationships to determine the importance of relationships in the workplace for

an individual's professional life and the need for relationships for social engagement, better team productivity, and professional growth. Through workplace relationships, employees look for a high level of trust with supervisors and peers with the expectation that everyone shares the same goals, values, and commitment to career success individually, as a team, and for the organization (Khawaja, 2020).

Findings associated with certain aspects identified in the literature helped to explain and add context to the participants' experiences with military career and promotion opportunities and how their cultural and social groups influenced their opportunities. Many of the participants' responses confirmed the information from the literature review. I discussed the themes related to mentorship for leadership development, personal initiative for professional development and job opportunities, setting personal career aspirations, hindered career progress by limited guidance or by not having a career plan, the influence of cultural and social groups on job opportunities, and perceived strong connections with shared cultural and social groups by senior leaders. I present the details of these themes in Chapter 4. The conceptual framework of Khawaja's theory on workplace relationships provided the basis for understanding the need for trusted workplace relationships for career success (Khawaja, 2020).

Mentorship for Leadership Development

The data and literature review indicated a need for mentorship for leadership development by African American military officers. For example, Chivvis and Lauji (2022) noted that officers in the combat arms (tactical or operation branches) make up 80 percent of the general officer positions and hold the majority of the senior-level positions.

Most African American officers select noncombat arms branches, such as logistics, personnel, or communications for jobs that transition to career jobs after the Military (Chivvis & Lauji, 2022). According to Burroughs and Ruth (2022), there is a social attraction to groups and organizations based on common bonds, and why African Americans may select branches where they see other African Americans in large numbers. Khawaja (2020) further explains that this workplace relationship is a shared identification-based trust where the individuals have a personal attachment and a shared understanding of each other's emotions and actions.

The study also identified that the majority of white officers joined the combat arms branches (infantry, armor, and artillery) based on patriotism, family, and social connections (Chivvis & Lauji, 2022; Khawaja, 2020). While it is an informal requirement for selection to senior-level positions, it causes many minorities and women to be ineligible to hold senior-level positions (Chivvis & Lauji, 2022). I confirmed this information from participants through six individual case studies. All six participants served in noncombat arms branches but served in organizations where they competed with combat arms officers, majority white males, for positions that increased promotion opportunities. In a study of providing a racially inclusive military, Gamble (2020) identified the lack of senior minority leaders due to social bias by those considered as the social majority (White males), who control the promotions and career opportunities. The study identified the need for the social majority to recognize their advantage and to level the opportunities for minorities and women to compete with their White male peers (Gamble, 2020). All participants shared a perceived social connection between the

combat arms officers (White males), whether it was the same career branch, school, or cultural background. The participants shared that they either felt they did not receive the same mentorship or had to pursue mentorship from their own cultural or social groups, which did not have the same ability to affect promotion opportunities to senior-level positions as their White counterparts. The President of the United States and Military officials recognized the imbalance of African Americans in senior-level positions in the government and placed policies and programs in effect to address the immediate issue (Executive Order No. 14035, 2021; MLDC Decision Paper #2, 2011). The military also recognized the limited access minorities and women have to senior leader mentors of the same gender or race. They may not receive the full benefits of having a mentor as those of their White counterparts (MLDC Decision Paper #25, 2011).

In most instances, the participants were the only African American officers in their organization and very rarely had a supervisor who shared their career branch or any other social or cultural connection. In the theoretical framework for workplace relationships, there is a psychological need for employees to feel a connection or a sense of belonging with others in the workplace (Khawaja, 2020). According to Chivvis and Lauji (2022), African Americans represent a significantly low number in combat arms or operational jobs, which also supports the military's reason for the low number of African Americans in senior-level positions and may be the reason most African Americans pursue careers where they see senior leaders that share their same social and cultural background. Three of the six participants, who were the most senior in grade, shared their experience with having White supervisors who advised or served as an informal mentor

for career development opportunities. According to Khawaja (2020), individuals will develop a relationship without one that is more prevalent or comfortable to them for beneficial purposes. All six participants shared comments on the need for a mentor with a preference for one with the same cultural and social background. The four most senior of the six participants had someone that assisted in some capacity as an informal mentor at different points of their careers and was beneficial in providing career-enhancing opportunities. Participants in a similar study referenced the need for mentorship and shared that it did not matter how or from whom they received mentorship; it was the trust and heartfelt connection with visible support with career assignments and social connections (Godfrey & Benson, 2023). However, the two junior field grade officers (Majors) did not have such opportunities and felt it kept them from selecting key jobs and reaching the grade of Lieutenant Colonel.

According to a review of mentorship programs for women in the military, mentorship must be deliberate and individually based (Tam-Seto & Imre-Millei, 2022). Participants in the review perceived the lack of mentorship on the low number of women in senior positions and the lack of trust in a male-dominated organization (Sherrer & Hayes-Burrell, 2023). Godfrey and Benson (2023) support the need for mentorship, and while it is human nature to pair with someone of the same cultural and social groups, it is not always an option or the most beneficial, especially if the decision makers are of a different cultural or social group. According to Godfrey and Benson (2023), mentors with high interpersonal responses can provide a sense of trust with stronger expectations of support for career progression despite not sharing similar backgrounds. Regardless of

each participant's experience with mentorship, they all shared that in the absence of a mentor; they had to take the initiative to develop their own career plans.

Personal Initiative for Professional Development

The second theme from the data and literature review is the need by the participants to take the personal initiative for professional development and pursuing job opportunities. Five of the six participants discussed their aggression in creating their own career opportunities. Only one participant, who was the most junior of the six, stated they did not pursue any opportunities and only took the jobs assigned and were only committed to doing their best, as that would be enough for a promotion. The military trains individuals to be vocational leaders who believe in working as a team to support the success of others (Siew & Koh, 2022). While the Army provides all officers with a career development roadmap that includes institutional training, operational assignments, and self-development, the Military manages only the first two areas; it is the responsibility of the officer to manage their own self-development (Army University Press, 2017). This leaves officers to determine what type of self-development will help support their career opportunities, such as degrees, certifications, or connecting with branch or service-related associations.

According to Nowowiejski (2017), in an Army career development study, many military officers have difficulty establishing a career development plan and receiving the training and job opportunities for career progression without the guidance of a mentor. Trusted workplace relationships require a level of reliable alliance where individuals trust their peers, mentors and leaders to have an equally supportive and beneficial relationship

(Khawaja, 2020). Four of the participants shared that with the lack of guidance, they watched their peers to gauge what they should do for promotion. The two senior participants (Colonels) shared they reached out to their leaders for guidance when their leaders failed to offer assistance and continuously took every opportunity available for additional training to include advanced degrees. This is the opposite of the two junior participants (Majors) that felt they didn't have any guidance or support and with advanced degrees and no negative performance appraisals, still not considered to the next grade level (Lieutenant Colonel) with their peers. It was their perception that the senior White male officers ensured the junior White male officers received priority for promotable job opportunities. For centuries, there has been a social hierarchy in the United States that has replicated itself in organizations such as the military (Gamble, 2020). The social majority in the military officer corps is the White male infantry officer, with the perceived belief of taking care of those in their own social circle and leaving minority social groups to take care of themselves (Gamble, 2020). They also shared that they didn't take the initiative to gain advice from their leadership but perceived that their White counterparts were receiving guidance and support and promoted ahead of them. Studies show the more senior the level, the more competitive and the more impeccable one's records must be for promotion. The selection to General Officer is so competitive that it informally comes down to who you know and the members of the board (Chivvis & Lauji, 2022). With the lack of diversity on the boards and the minimal amount of African American general officers, African American officers, must have White mentors or a social connection to board members that are knowledgeable of their leadership

ability and able to share that information with other board members as shared by members for their White counterparts (Chivvis & Lauji, 2022). Organizational success is built on a mutual trust that employees work hard to achieve organizations success and the same support reciprocated to its employees (Khawaja, 2020). In addition to taking the initiative, I identified the need for junior officers to know what they want to accomplish or what the goal is to develop their career plan.

Personal Career Aspirations

The third theme is the need to have career aspirations. All of the participants shared their career goals as they entered the Military. Of the six participants, only one had the goal of performing at the senior level or becoming a general officer. All of the participants were satisfied with completing 20 years (retirement) and four participants shared they considered it success if they made the grade of Lieutenant Colonel. Although the military places individuals in jobs based on the needs of the organization, they allow individuals to submit their preferences (Chivvis & Lauji, 2022). Studies show that most African Americans chose support jobs, such as logistic, communications, and human resources as career fields they can use after separation from the military (Chivvis & Lauji, 2022). While it is an unwritten rule, combat arms officers, which are White males, hold the majority of the senior level positions. It is perceived that White officers join for patriotism, cultural and social commitment, such as following the career of family members, those they served in the same military academy or informal mentors based on the media or positions within the military (Chivvis & Lauji, 2022). This also connects to mentorship and whether individuals see themselves or someone that shares their cultural

or social groups in all the career fields at each level within an organization (Williams, 2019). In a study of Military African American Warrant Officers' experience with achieving senior level, they shared their aspirations of becoming senior warrants by seeing others in their career field that shared their cultural and social groups or followed the recommendations of those in their social groups (Williams, 2019). Statistics show that the majority of all officers retire at the grades of Lieutenant Colonel and Colonel, but the number is significantly lower for minorities at all grades (Chivvis & Lauji, 2022). Literature shows that employees' morale and inspiration are greater when employees see individuals in similar cultural and social groups in senior leadership positions, thus encouraging everyone to have career aspirations while developing an inclusive workplace (Fujino et al. 2020; Singh, et al., 2022). The military agrees in the need for cultural competence and by having a diverse and inclusive organization promotes mission readiness in dealing with global cultural differences (MDLC, Decision Paper #5, 2011). With policies and programs in place to assist all officers with career planning, the fourth theme covers how minority officers receive information on career planning.

Limited Guidance in Career Planning

The fourth theme identified is how having limited guidance and not having a career plan hindered career progression. I categorized the participants shared experiences as a hinderance to their career progression which included reasons provided as to why they believed they did not reach their aspired rank or did not get the same jobs or promotion opportunities at the same rate of their peers. In an article about the invisibility of African Americans at the top, a former secretary of defense share the unwritten rule of

majority culture groups taking care of their own and how it is difficult for them to see a problem in a career planning process that they control (Cooper, 2020). The military stands by its promotion process its sound criteria for the selection of its general officers, but those officers from different cultural backgrounds participating in the study, shared the need for a mentor to provide guidance and support to making it to the senior level (Cooper, 2020). All six participants shared either how they lacked guidance from their senior leader or how they had to take initiative in approaching their supervisor or senior leader for possible career opportunities. According to Gamble (2020), the social majority writes the narrative on the inequalities of the military and dismiss systemic bias or racism, but the fault of the individual or cultural differences. The author further states that the minorities or the oppressed group is responsible for fixing their own problems of injustice treatment without access to resources of power (Gamble 2020). There were also the limited aspirations provided by five of the six participants, as their only aspirations were to complete 20 years for retirement. The goal in the Army's promotion plan is for officers to make the grade of Lieutenant Colonel in 17 years and Colonel in 22 years (DA PAM 600-3, 2014). Individuals considered earlier than these timeframes are due to exceptional appraisals or job performances ahead of their peers. These examples lead into the participants shared perception of politics in the Military for position and promotion opportunities of who you know versus just having an exceptional performance and meeting all of the promotional requirements. They shared that they needed someone to ensure they received the high-profile jobs and someone on the board that was familiar with their leadership skills and performance potential to the next grade due to the

competition at the senior level grades. According to Chivvis and Lauji (2022), it is important to have a senior leader that is well known and connected with other senior leaders to vouch for those considered for promotion from Colonel to General. The article further quotes a statement that “Black officers cannot just have other minority officers looking out for them, but also need a lot of majority officers [in other words, White officers] who can vouch for their performance.” All of these themes together respond to the first research question. The next two themes are supportive of RQ2: What are African American veteran Military officers’ perceptions of whether their cultural and social groups influenced their career opportunities?

Cultural and Social Group Influence

The first theme related to this question is the influence of cultural and social groups on job opportunities. The Military is known for its team or group cohesiveness and the individual support each person provides to mission success (Burroughs & Ruth, 2022). However, within the groups, there are competitions in subgroups that are meant to push individuals to perfect their skills (Burroughs & Ruth, 2022). All six participants shared the lack of access to senior level leaders and mentors that shared their cultural background. The most senior grade participant had access to senior level leaders through a social group (fraternity) at the mid-career point, but none were able to affect promotion selection, performance appraisals, or job opportunities. According to Rankin (2023), senior leaders are more likely to formally mentor those of their own cultural and social demographics. The author also explains the importance of mentors doing more than providing advice, but also having an effect on mentees opportunities for job and

promotion opportunities and how relationships should begin early in the officer's career (Rankin, 2023).

The participants shared comfort and trust in others that share their same cultural and social groups and how uncomfortable they were with engaging in social groups outside of their own. According to Tam-Seto and Imre-Millei (2022), individuals prefer mentorship and guidance from those with shared cultural and social grouping to express their knowledge of a successful career journey of similar values, beliefs and experiences. However, the three senior individuals in the study recognized the need to participate with others cultural and social groups for the purpose of career opportunities or recognition by the senior leadership despite feeling displaced. According to Rankin (2023), it is not an intentional act by White senior leaders to limit mentorship to minority officers, but a subconscious act of what is familiar or human nature to help those that share one's cultural and social values and beliefs. However, organizations must produce and grow trusted cross-cultural relationships for strong, creative and successful individuals, teams and unit to meet international missions (Khawaja, 2020). Reviews show there are benefits to cross-cultural mentorship for both the mentor and the mentees in providing an understanding of other cultural experiences, self-awareness of biases, and opening the abilities to other social groups for more career opportunities (Tam-Seto & Imre-Millei, 2022). The three most senior participants provided experiences with participation with other social and cultural groups to maintain visibility with their senior leader and to stay connected with job opportunities to support promotion opportunities. In a study of senior career opportunities for Warrant Officer in the military, 100 percent of the participants

shared the importance of a mentor, regardless of sharing a social or cultural connection and how they maintained those relationships throughout their career (Williams, 2019). However, the majority of the participants shared while they had cross-cultural mentors for the purpose of career opportunities, having a mentor with the same cultural background provided cultural experience and social familiarity (Williams, 2019). Participant 2FC shared that even when it was uncomfortable, it was necessary to participate with other cultural and social groups to stay connected with the senior leader for job information and performance visibility.

Shared Cultural and Social Senior Leaders

The second theme identified is the perceived strong connections with shared cultural and social groups by senior leaders. This emerged from the participants' experiences and documentation on internal and external cultural and social groups in the workplace. Burroughs and Ruth (2022) addressed the selection of workplace groups through social attractiveness, which includes the extent to which one identifies with the other members (characteristics, values, and beliefs) and the prestige or benefits of being a member. The military prides itself on unit cohesion and the bonding relationships of belonging and sharing in the success of the group (Burroughs & Ruth, 2022). However, in most military groups, there are more subgroups, such as branch affiliation, officer or enlisted, airborne, race and gender. All six participants shared their social attractiveness to the military first and then to those individuals and groups that shared their same cultural and social backgrounds such as career branch affiliations, fraternities, sororities, race and gender connections. In addition to their preference of cultural and social groups

and mentors from those groups, they all identified the presence of other cultural and social groups outside of their internal groups. The concern shared by the participants was limited job opportunities and access to formal mentorship when they were not a member of the same social or cultural group of their senior leadership. Proper mentorship for minorities and women requires an understanding of the challenges, experiences and individual needs by their mentors (Chivvis & Lauji, 2022). Mentorship for All six participants shared either observations of favoritism for job or promotion opportunities by other cultures, such as their White male counterparts. According to a report by Nieberg (2023), minority officers didn't consider discrimination as the reason for the low number of promotion opportunities for minorities but did perceive unconscious bias by leadership as the reason for limited career-enhancing opportunities. The Military conducted a study and determined the need for more diversity in senior leadership and the importance for minorities and women to have those trusted relationship with individuals from the same cultural and social groups, but they also identified that some minorities and women progressed further in their careers with the support of mentors outside of their gender and cultural groups (MLDC, Issue Paper #25, 2011). While the participants were unable to provide clear examples of White leaders taking care of members of their own cultural or social groups, they identified the need to have more African American senior leaders as most minorities had White supervisors with minimum to no social connection, considering this as a reason for low promotion opportunities (Nieberg, 2023). Four participants in my study discussed an African American organization founded to help mentor other African American officers in the Military, but none of them worked directly

for any of the African American senior leaders to provide direct career-enhancing opportunities. While there is no support in the military reviews to prove minorities or women progress further with shared cultural or social group mentors, the studies do show individuals to perceive to have more trust, psychosocial support and role modeling when they share the same groups with their mentors (MLDC, Issue Paper #25, 2011). Research and recent laws suggest the military strive to create a more diverse senior leadership that is representative of the national average with the intent of providing a voice for the underrepresented (Cooper, 2020).

Limitations of the Study

Although the study provided insight into African American veteran Army officers' experiences with promotion and career opportunities and how their social and cultural relationships influenced those opportunities, there were limitations. The first limitation was not having the perspective of African American general officers as senior level officers. No general officers volunteered to participate in the study. Using the snowball sampling process to select participants limited the study and results to field grade officers to the grade of Colonel. Without a direct request, it may be difficult to get general officers to volunteer for a study due to their professional level. The experience of African American general officers would expand the level of information gained from African American general officers that achieved the most senior level of Military officers.

The next limitation of this study was only including African American veteran officers. The problem associated with the study is a concern for all minorities and women

as officers and enlisted personnel pursuing promotion opportunities to the senior level. Conducting an inclusive study with active or veteran minorities and women officers and enlisted personnel may help to generalize the results to all minorities and women in the Military.

Another limitation was access to participants' personal documents of career and promotional opportunities. The participants shared numerous experiences of the lack of job opportunities and how their White senior leaders selected individuals that shared their same cultural and social groups over minorities for career enhancing opportunities but did not have any direct documentation to support the examples. I had to use studies and promotion demographic reports to support information collected from the interviews as a request for documentation of performance appraisals or the selection of command level positions for promotion opportunities is difficult to achieve from the Military human resources department.

Recommendation

The study findings revealed areas to address to better support the unique needs of African American Military Officers. I have included recommendations that may provide additional insight for future research on the Military career and promotion system for minorities and women. I divided the recommendations into three categories: formal mentorship program, formal career development training for senior leaders and potential and junior officers and a formal career development tracking system for all military officers.

The results of this study may help to expand research to advance social change. The focus of social change may be in the areas of developing, mentoring, recruiting, and selecting African American Officers and other minorities for senior level positions in the Military. In the most recent Military promotion demographics study finalized in 2022, minorities made up 21.9 percent of the officers between the grades of O-4 through O-6 which White officers represented 78.1 percent (DoD Demographics, 2022). This same report reflects that African American officers represent 8 percent of the 21.9 percent. Considering these statistical facts and figures, the Military and Department of Defense must revise mentoring, training, and overall career development programs to improve the imbalances and representation of all demographic Military services.

Formal Mentorship Program

Responses received from all research participants and supporting documentation reflect the validity of a more formal mentorship program for the military. By establishing a formal program will allow every officer to have a senior mentor assigned and responsible ensuring the mentees understand the career development program with career goals, and assistance with development timelines and opportunities. Understanding that everyone may not receive high-profile jobs for promotion opportunities, it would be the responsibility of the senior leader to ensure the equitable assignments based on the officer's job performance and ratings. While most of the participants and the supporting documentation showed a preference to have a mentor with shared cultural or social grouping, the military should match senior level mentors based on career branch. If senior leaders with the same cultural and social group are available, it should be an option

based on the request of the mentee, but the goal should be to encourage cross-cultural mentorship to give mentors and mentees an awareness and understanding of other cultural behaviors, values, and journeys (Bristol, 2020).

Mentorship should also start with emerging and junior officers, before they select their career branch or start their career enhancing jobs. As noted by several of the participants; in addressing the representation of African Americans in senior level positions, there is a need for a more diverse group of Military senior leadership that is representative of the national percentage or overall percentage for the military (Garamone, 2022). The group should work jointly in identifying African American officers, who want to pursue senior level opportunities by providing and assisting the officers with developing a career plan.

Senior level leadership must connect early with potential minority officers to assist with career goals and to provide a plan or examples of positions, assignments, training and education needed to possibly meet those career goals. For junior officers (specifically minority and women), the senior leaders must go beyond advising and assist with supporting the career plan by monitoring appropriate job placement and making sure appraisals accurately affect performance to be competitive with peers (Tronto, et al., 2020).

The resulting themes and codes applying to this research indicate that it is important for the Department of Defense, which governs the Military departments to improve the current career development and job placement program to add a formal mentorship program for all potential and junior officers (Department of Defense, 2021).

Currently, mentorship is mostly informal with no specific guide for all senior leaders responsible for developing future leaders. By broadening potential and junior minority officer's interaction with senior leaders from other cultural and social groups can expand their knowledge of Military career and job opportunities and possibly increase career goals and aspirations for African American officers Singh, et al., 2022).

Formal Career Training

The Military already provides leadership development training for junior, mid-career and senior leaders; however, it is not specific to formal mentorship or how to navigate the informal social connection for career enhancing opportunities. The current training is directed to the duties and responsibilities at the next level of their career or promotable grade. Formal training on mentorship that includes cultural and social awareness will assist with individual acknowledgement of human nature or cognitive bias formed based on personal experiences though their own cultural and social groups.

In addition to training senior leaders for formally mentoring potential and junior minority officers, potential minority officers should receive training in all the military career branches, to include the types of jobs, training and education needed, the demographics and senior level opportunities for each branch. In this study, none of the participants worked in Military jobs relative to their college degrees.

In addition to training senior leaders for formally mentoring potential and junior minority officers, potential minority officers should receive training in all of the career opportunities, to include the types of jobs, training and education needed, the demographics and senior level opportunities. This approach could significantly impact

how underrepresented groups in the Department of Defense advance through their careers.

Formal Career Tracking System

Currently, each Military service (Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines and Coast Guard) has an Officer Personnel Management Division, responsible for tracking all actions to include assignments, evaluations, promotions and career development assistance. The career development manager provides information and written regulations and policies to assist the officer with making informed decisions on their individual development plan. The primary responsibility of the personnel management division is to meet the assignment needs for the service, which may require minorities to fill jobs such as equal opportunity or recruitment officer to promote recruitment and retainability of minorities for the military (MLDC, 2011). However, these positions are not considered as career enhancement to senior level position (MLDC, 2011).

By implementing a more robust career monitoring system, it would be possible to tailor career development plans more closely to individual needs, fostering a more equitable environment. This system could also enhance the mentoring and sponsorship relationships that are crucial for career progression, ensuring that junior officers receive the guidance they need to succeed. Such a revision could ultimately contribute to a more diverse and inclusive leadership within the DoD.

Implications

The results of the study highlight significant implications for social change within the Department of Defense and the Military services. Despite the DoD's efforts to create a

flexible, fair, and equitable career development and promotion system for all Military personnel, challenges remain in addressing the demographic disparities within the senior level promotions and leadership positions (MLDC, 2011). Although there has been progress over the last few decades, minorities and women are significantly lagging behind White male officers for field grade promotions and placement in senior level positions (McClellan, 2020). This research offers valuable insights into the revision of current processes that could help close this gap and provide greater opportunities for minorities and women to advance to senior level positions within the Military. These findings underscore the importance of continued efforts to enhance diversity and inclusion at the highest levels of leadership within the Department of Defense. The theoretical framework of Workplace Relationships as articulated by Khawaja (2020), provides an understanding of the need for trust and security in an organization and built through cultural and social relationships in the workplace. This concept is particularly relevant to the research findings, which suggest the advancement of African Americans Military officers to senior level positions relies on early mentorship with career planning and key job opportunities by senior level officers, despite having a shared cultural or social group. This is significant because the study indicates that minorities and women can go through half their careers or longer without working for a senior officer that shares the same cultural or social groups (Chivvis & Lauji, 2022). By acknowledging and staying cognizance of real or perceived cultural and social biases, senior level officers can significantly influence the career trajectories of minorities and women in the Military (McClellan, 2020). Over time, as these supportive practices become embedded in the

Military culture, they have the potential to transform the organization's approach to fair practices, programs, and opportunities for all Military personnel and formalizing a career program that supports an equitable advancement of African Americans to senior level positions as a normalized and expected outcome.

This study emphasizes the role that all senior level officers play in fostering the advancement of African Americans within the Military. By serving as a formal mentor, senior level officers can provide the necessary guidance and support to help emerging leaders navigate their careers to achieve senior level positions. The perceptions and experience of the participants from multiple case studies and relevant documentation are key to identifying innovative strategies that could lead to significant changes in the recruitment, training, and development of African American Military senior leaders.

Khawaja's (2020) workplace relationship framework based on key propositions related to the need for relationships with mutual benefits and trust supports the findings and recommendations for this study that advocates for a system where rights and opportunities are equitably distributed, ensuring that every individual, regardless of race, has the chance to succeed.

According to Khawaja's theory, relationships play a key role in organizational conflict, teamwork, and inclusion in professional life. Workplace relationships provide a sense of security and trust and fill the need for successful relationships to share benefits, stay engaged and provide organizational support to remain strong competitors (Khawaja, 2020).

Ultimately, the implementation of new processes, informed by these concepts, could enhance the career trajectories of African American Military officers. By improving career planning and creating a more formal mentorship program can make advancement to senior level positions more attainable.

In advancing social change focused on the development of African American Military senior leaders, this research reflects the current policies, programs and actions the Department of Defense and senior leaders employ to develop a diverse group of Military officers and recommendations the Department of Defense and senior leaders should change, to include a formal mentoring program for emerging African American Military officers and future senior leaders. The Department of Defense and Military leadership must proactively lead efforts to create and implement career development plans and job opportunities prior to commissioning African Americans as officers and continue to track through a formal mentoring program to enhance their abilities to compete effectively for senior level promotions and positions.

The results of the research underscore the pivotal role that the Department of Defense and all senior level Military officers play in advancing social change, particularly in the development of African American senior leaders. These leaders must actively engage in mentoring emerging African American officers by guiding them through the complexities of career advancement within the Military. By taking the initiative to design and implement early career planning with targeted job opportunities and development programs, senior level officers can significantly enhance the ability of

African American officers to compete effectively for senior level promotions and positions.

This initiative-taking approach is significant for closing the gap in representation of minorities and women at the highest levels of Military leadership within the Department of Defense. This approach also provides emerging and careerist African American officers with the knowledge, experiences, and opportunities necessary to succeed. The commitment of developing African American senior leaders can drive meaningful progress toward a more inclusive and equitable leadership structure within the Military and the Department of Defense.

Conclusion

This study examined and discussed lived experiences of African American veteran Military officers' experiences with promotion and career opportunities and how their social and cultural relationships influenced those opportunities. The Department of Defense and the U.S. Military have developed policies and programs to support the diversity, equity, and inclusion of all the services (Garrett, 2021). The Department of Defense also believes its Military should be a reflection of the nation's diversity and respect to Military personnel. It is important to mission readiness and success and serves as an important strategic asset (Garrett, 2021). This supports the need to ensure there is a diverse and equitable Military staff at all levels to include senior level positions. Based on the results of this study, the Military and the Department of Defense must create innovative processes and procedures to address the imbalance of minorities and women in Military senior level positions, particularly concerning the representation of African

Americans. To support equality of African American Military officers at the senior level, there should be targeted outreach on the Military career planning for emerging and junior African American officers. This should include training and an introduction to all Military branches of service, job opportunities to include career plans, goals and opportunities with specific data demographics for senior level promotions and job-related opportunities. The training should include the introduction of African American emerging officers to a diverse group of senior level officers sharing their knowledge, experience and support to a fair and equitable Military at all levels.

The second recommendation is the need for a formal mentorship program for all officers, especially for African American junior and careerist officers. By establishing a formal mentorship program for junior and careerist for African American officers with senior level officers provides visibility and assistance with career planning, individual development, job opportunities, and review of performance appraisals throughout the officer's career.

Finally, incorporating bias and cultural training for Military leaders to assist with minimizing human nature to connect and support only those that share the same cultural or social groups. The opportunities for African American officers to work for senior level officers that share their cultural or social groups are limited to null throughout their careers, thus requiring them to have a formal and social connection to senior leaders outside their own cultural and personal social groups for help with advising and advocating for job opportunities and career advancement to create an inclusive

environment that supports fair, equitable and diverse leadership at all levels of the Military.

True change can only occur as a result of actions taken to advance social change. In advancing social change leading to improved equality at Military senior level positions, the Military and the Department of Defense must take actions to reform career development and monitoring and mentoring of minority officers. Former Acting Secretary of Defense Christopher C. Miller emphasized the importance of diversity on mission readiness, team cohesion, and fair opportunities at all levels of the military in his 17 December 2020 memorandum on improving racial and ethnic diversity of the military (Garrett, 2021).

President Biden published an executive order to promote the importance that our national security workforce represent the full diversity of our nation (Executive Order No. 14035, 2021). The senior advisor to the secretary of defense for human capital and diversity equity and inclusion, confirms the need for a more equitable and diverse military, as our national security depends on leaders seeing a more diverse military for innovative planning and solutions to complex military issues (Garamone, 2022).

Without social change through the implementation of the recommendations addressed in this study, an equal opportunity will not exist for African Americans Military officers to pursue career advancement opportunities at the senior level. Without social change will continue to be limited job opportunities to set minority officers up for career success in an equivalent manner as the majority demographic group (White male officers) which dominates the senior level positions for all Military services. As noted by

one participant, “there are African Americans that mentor and support other African American junior officer, but the difference is White male officers a far greater advantage because they are great in number in field grade and senior level positions.” To promote change, there must be a correction of imbalances and improve the representation of African Americans in senior level positions in the Military and the Department of Defense. Social change through the implementation through revised and new personnel policies across the Department of Defense and the Military for a more formal career developmental process for African American emerging and careerist officers in a manner that does not hinder equality but rather allow forming of a racially and gender balanced organization at all levels, but specifically at the senior level of the Military organizations. I encourage the expansion of this research to advance change in the representation of minorities and women in senior level positions for the Military’s enlisted and officer corps and the Department of Defense.

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