

4-21-2026

Perceived Bias and Barriers Among Black Women in Professional Leadership

Rochelle Wilhelmina Gilbert
Walden University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.waldenu.edu/dissertations>



Part of the [Women's Studies Commons](#)

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the Walden Dissertations and Doctoral Studies Collection at ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Walden Dissertations and Doctoral Studies by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact ScholarWorks@waldenu.edu.

Walden University

College of Psychology and Community Services

This is to certify that the doctoral dissertation by

Rochelle Wilhelmina Gilbert

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,
and that any and all revisions required by
the review committee have been made.

Review Committee

Dr. Virginia Smith, Committee Chairperson, Human Services Faculty

Dr. Barbara Benoliel, Committee Member, Human Services Faculty

Chief Academic Officer and Provost

Sue Subocz, Ph.D.

Walden University

2026

Abstract

Perceived Bias and Barriers Among Black Women in Professional Leadership

by

Rochelle Wilhelmina Gilbert

EdD, University of Louisiana Monroe, 2000

MS, University of Louisiana Monroe, 1996

BA, University of Louisiana Monroe, 1995

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Human and Social Services

Walden University

May 2026

Abstract

Black women have long contributed to leadership in academia, government, and the nonprofit sector, yet they remain significantly underrepresented in senior leadership roles in higher education. When Black women are missing from leadership, institutions lose out on talent, students lose out on representation, and society loses out on the full range of perspectives needed to solve complex problems. Grounded in Black Feminist Thought, this general qualitative study explored the experiences and perceptions of bias and barriers among Black women serving in leadership roles at the dean level and above in higher education. Data were collected through structured interviews with seven participants recruited via purposive sampling. Five themes emerged from the thematic analysis: (1) the concrete ceiling, (2) intersectional discrimination, (3) professional and social isolation, (4) tokenism and hypervisibility, and (5) resilience as strategic resistance. A key recommendation is for academic leadership to implement transparent, equity-centered promotion and evaluation processes that include explicit, publicly available criteria, regular audits for racial and gender bias, and diverse review committees. The social impact implications include the potential for higher education leaders to dismantle systemic barriers by fostering pathways that ensure diverse representation in academic leadership and by creating more inclusive and equitable higher education environments.

Perceived Bias and Barriers Among Black Women in Professional Leadership

by

Rochelle Wilhelmina Gilbert

EdD, University of Louisiana Monroe, 2000

MS, University of Louisiana Monroe, 1996

BA, University of Louisiana Monroe, 1995

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Human and Social Services

Walden University

May 2026

Dedication

To my mother, Mrs. Clara Gilbert, the first leader I ever knew. You did not carry a title, yet you led with grace, tenacity, and an unshakable faith that shaped everything I am and everything I have dared to become. You taught me that a Black woman's brilliance is not diminished by the rooms that refuse to make space for her, it simply finds another door. Every word written in this dissertation carries the echo of your voice, your prayers, and the quiet sacrifices you made so that I might stand where I stand today.

To every Black woman who has ever been told, in policy, in practice, or in silence, that the seat at the table was not meant for her, this work is yours. Your perseverance is not invisible. Your leadership is not incidental. You are the reason this research exists, and you are the reason it matters.

And to God, my source, my sustainer, my constant, to whom all glory belongs, now and always.

Acknowledgments

First and foremost, I give all honor and praise to God, my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, whose grace carried me through every season of this journey, the seasons of clarity and the seasons of doubt alike. It is by His strength, and not my own, that this work is complete. To Him be all the glory.

To my dissertation chair, Dr. Virginia Smith, your guidance has been nothing short of transformative. You challenged me to think deeper, write more precisely, and trust the rigor of my own inquiry. Your scholarly wisdom, your patience, and your unwavering belief in the significance of this work sustained me at every stage of this process. I am profoundly grateful for your mentorship and honored to have worked under your direction.

To my committee member, Dr. Barbara Benoliel, thank you for the precision of your feedback, the depth of your insight, and the generosity with which you gave both. Your expertise strengthened this dissertation in ways I could not have achieved alone, and your commitment to scholarly excellence set a standard I will carry with me throughout my career.

To my mother, Mrs. Clara Gilbert, there are no words sufficient to express what your love has meant to this journey. You have been my anchor, my encourager, and my living example of what it means to persevere with dignity and faith. Thank you for never allowing me to quit on myself, even in the moments I was most tempted to do so.

To the seven extraordinary Black women leaders who participated in this study, your willingness to speak your truth with candor, vulnerability, and power is the

foundation upon which this entire body of work rests. You gave voice to experiences that the academy has too long rendered invisible, and you did so with grace and courage that humbles me. This dissertation belongs, primarily, to you.

To my colleagues, peers, and the broader community of scholars and practitioners committed to equity and inclusion in higher education, your solidarity, your intellectual generosity, and your shared conviction that this work is necessary have been a source of profound encouragement. I am better for having walked this path in community.

Finally, to every mentor who believed before I did, every student who reminded me why leadership in education matters, and every Black woman who has dared to lead in spaces not designed to hold her, this is for you, and because of you.

Table of Contents

List of Tables	vii
Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study.....	1
Background.....	4
Problem Statement.....	7
Purpose of the Study	8
Research Question	9
Theoretical Framework for the Study.....	9
Nature of the Study.....	11
Definitions.....	12
Assumptions.....	14
Scope and Delimitations	14
Limitations	16
Significance.....	17
Implications for Social impact.....	18
Summary	19
Chapter 2: Literature Review.....	21
Introduction.....	21
Literature Search Strategy.....	23
Theoretical Foundation	24
Black Women in Higher Education	27
History of Black Women in Higher Education.....	27

Underrepresentation of Black Women in Higher Education Administration	28
Isolation.....	30
Imposter Syndrome	34
Tokenism.....	40
Institutional Barriers	42
Opportunities for Black Women in Higher Education	44
Mentorship/Sponsorship	44
Intersectionality.....	47
Summary and Conclusions	50
Chapter 3: Research Method.....	53
Introduction.....	53
Research Design and Rationale	53
Role of the Researcher	54
Methodology.....	56
Participant Selection Logic.....	56
Sample Size and Data Saturation.....	58
Instrumentation	59
Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection (as Appropriate).....	59
Recruitment.....	60
Participation	60
Data Collection	61

Triangulation and Trustworthiness	61
Data Analysis Plan	62
Coding Method	62
Possible Types of Sources of Data.....	63
Limitations, Challenges, and/or Barriers	63
Access to Participants	64
Issues of Trustworthiness.....	64
Credibility (Internal Validity).....	65
Transferability (External Validity)	67
Dependability (Reliability)	68
Confirmability (Objectivity)	69
Intra and Intercoder Reliability.....	71
Ethical Procedures	72
Institutional Permissions and Informed Consent	73
Ethical Concerns Related to Recruitment and Data Collection	74
Data Confidentiality, Storage, and Dissemination.....	74
Additional Ethical Considerations	75
Summary	76
Chapter 4: Results.....	78
Introduction.....	78
Setting	78
Demographics	79

Participant Profiles.....	81
Amsterdam.....	81
Delhi	82
Dubai	82
Madrid.....	83
Milan	84
Rome	85
Yokohama.....	86
Data Collection	87
Data Analysis.....	88
Codebook.....	91
Theme 1: Navigating the Invisible Barriers, The Concrete Ceiling in Action.....	91
Theme 2: The Weight of Dual Marginalization, Intersections of Race and Gender.....	92
Theme 3: Isolation and the Outsider-Within Experience	92
Theme 4: Tokenism, Hypervisibility, and the Burden of Representation	92
Theme 5: Resilience, Resistance, and Strategic Survival.....	92
Code Consolidation and Focused Coding Summary	93
Evidence of Trustworthiness.....	93
Credibility	93
Transferability.....	94

Dependability	94
Confirmability.....	95
Results.....	95
Theme 1: Navigating the Invisible Barriers: The Concrete Ceiling in Action.....	96
Theme 2: The Weight of Dual Marginalization: Intersections of Race and Gender.....	98
Theme 3: Isolation and the Outsider-Within Experience	100
Theme 4: Tokenism, Hypervisibility, and the Burden of Representation	102
Theme 5: Resilience, Resistance, and Strategic Survival	104
Summary	106
Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations.....	108
Introduction.....	108
Interpretation of the Findings.....	109
Theme 1: The Concrete Ceiling.....	109
Theme 2: Intersectional Discrimination.....	110
Theme 3: Professional and Social Isolation.....	111
Theme 4: Tokenism and Hypervisibility	111
Theme 5: Resilience as Strategic Resistance	112
Findings Through the Lens of Black Feminist Thought.....	113
Limitations of the Study.....	114
Recommendations.....	116

Recommendations for Future Research	116
Recommendations for Practice	117
Implications.....	118
Implications for Positive Social impact	118
Methodological and Theoretical Implications	120
Conclusion	121
References.....	123
Appendix A: Codebook	144

List of Tables

Table 1. Participant Demographics..... 80

Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Historically, Black women have emerged as leaders in academia, organizations, nonprofits, and government agencies (Townsend, 2020). Black women excel in numerous careers including athletics, health care leaders, educators, authors, and performers, yet are often overlooked for leadership positions (Mbilishaka et al., 2023). Specifically, Black women have made meaningful strides in leadership advancement in higher education; however, this progress has not been without challenges (Chance, 2021). Black women have battled racism, sexism, classism, homophobia, isolation, climate issues, salary disparities, coping strategies, institutional ethos, and microaggressions while seeking to achieve higher leadership roles beyond tenured faculty status (Lewis & Williams, 2023; Moody et al., 2022).

Although Black women are entering leadership roles at increasing rates, this population remains sorely underrepresented in higher education (Boykin, 2022). They continually experience neglect in professional development, salary, advancement, and mentorship and sponsorship opportunities (Breedon, 2021). This is said to be a contributor to the lack of diversity, equity, and inclusion in student support systems, curriculum, and teaching practices (American Association of University Women, 2021). While Black women have made significant strides in leadership within higher education, the neglect they face in compensation, mentorship, professional development, and support continue to be a hindrance to achieving roles at top levels. To foster a more inclusive and equitable academic environment, addressing these disparities is essential.

Black women have raised concerns over the racial and ethnic disparity between diverse student populations and the lack of diverse representation in leadership and faculty (Priddie et al., 2022). Despite increases in minority enrollments, the composition of faculty and leadership has remained somewhat unchanged. In 2022, approximately 72% of postsecondary faculty in the United States (U.S.) were White, while only 28% were nonwhite, and only 7% were Black with 4% being Black female (National Center for Education Statistics, 2024)

Black women have raised concerns for years that although student bodies are becoming more diverse, leadership, as well as faculty remains disparate noting an overwhelmingly white population (Bitar et al., 2022, Gamble & Turner, 2025; Gender, Race, and Ethnicity of College Administrators, Faculty, and Staff, Fall 2015, 2017; Maylor et al., 2022).

This population remains unable to secure an equitable or representative stake in senior-level positions at institutions of higher learning although they make up a larger part of enrollment (Townsend, 2020). Likewise, affirmative action as outlined in the Civil Rights Act of 1964, has not assisted with the diversification of hiring of minorities or addressed discrimination as seen by the incongruent numbers of leaders at the dean and above level. Black women comprise less than 6.2% of executive, administrative, and managerial roles in higher education compared to white women who represent 42% of this group (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). The numbers are similar for Hispanic and Asian women. These numbers are not limited to administrators but expand to that of Black women tenured faculty members at colleges and universities thus further

limiting the pool of candidates (American Association of University Professors, 2022; Glover, 2012).

The purpose of this general qualitative study was to explore the experiences and perceptions of bias and barriers among Black women in professional leadership roles (dean and above) as they work to advance in institutions of higher learning. By documenting and analyzing their narratives, the study aimed not only to provide insight into the lived experiences and perspectives of Black women in senior leadership positions (e.g., dean, vice provost, provost, chancellor, vice president, president), but also to identify systemic practices and cultural barriers that shape leadership advancement in higher education. Isought to examine the strategies and support systems Black women employ to navigate and overcome these challenges. Using Black feminist thought as the guiding framework, the study centered the voices of Black women, whose experiences have historically been marginalized or overshadowed by theories of leadership advancement grounded in the perspectives of white women (Collins, 2018). Findings from this research informed institutional policy, leadership development programs, and equity initiatives, thereby contributing to social impact by fostering more inclusive pathways for leadership and ensuring diverse representation at the highest levels of higher education administration.

This chapter contains information on the study background, problem statement, purpose, research question, theoretical framework, nature of the study, and definition of terms. The assumptions, scope of research, delimitations, limitations, and the significance of the study are also included.

Background

While women have created a place for themselves in leadership positions at institutions of higher learning, few have advanced into the most senior roles (Davis & Maldonado, 2015). Women have been underrepresented in positions of leadership in higher education institutions as well as other industries for decades (Lawson et al., 2022). Subsequently, the pursuit of education has been the emphasis of the Black community as a critical opportunity for advancement and upward mobility for men and women alike (Irshad Ahmad Reshi et al., 2022). Likewise, for years, obtaining knowledge at this level has been misinterpreted, devaluated, and omitted within research studies. Black women leaders in higher education work in environments that create feelings of isolation, racism, and sexism, as illustrated by their lived experiences (Chance, 2021). Black women continue to find it challenging to progress and face a plethora of other issues including intersectionality, abuses of power, normalized tolerance of racial and gender prejudice or discrimination, tokenism, imposter syndrome, and glass ceilings and cliffs (Showunmi & Tomlin, 2023). As Black women have advanced in these positions, several research studies (Chance, 2021b; Johnson & Delmas, 2022; Mbilishaka et al., 2023) have explored perceptions and experiences, however, there is limited research on the biases and barriers they face. Collins (2002) noted that Black women in institutions of higher learning have differing experiences, backgrounds, and beliefs.

As aspiring leaders in academia, race and gender perpetuate divergent and unequal outcomes for Black women. Black women are not a monolith concerning their experiences and the barriers and biases faced but remain few in number or

underrepresented in higher education. Advancement opportunities for Black women continue to be plagued by barriers, including social norms and opportunity inequality that include occupational segregation, gender pay equity, motherhood penalties, as well as gender discrimination (Pogrebna et al., 2024). Societal expectations and rooted biases limit professional growth while also restricting access to critical opportunities for career advancement. Race and gender continue to create divergent and uneven outcomes for Black women.

Chance (2021) studied adversity and the lived experiences of Black women in higher education leadership. Chance found that Black women in leadership undergo adversity, including limited role models, the glass ceiling, the concrete ceiling, and the intersectionality of racism, sexism, and ageism, as well as tokenism. It was found that Black women use adversity as fuel coupled with resilience helping them to develop preparatory skills for leadership. The term, glass ceiling stands as a metaphor that describes an invisible barrier preventing women or minorities from excelling when they attempt to secure jobs in higher positions.

There is a need to understand how Black administrators have been able to break the glass ceiling in comparison to what is termed as the concrete ceiling, which is more difficult to navigate (Rennison & Bonomi, 2019). The concrete ceiling depicts the reality of barriers around Black women's experiences in career advancement due to double discrimination (Khosroshahi, 2021). Likewise, the concept of the glass cliff represents the notion of women being promoted to roles in leadership in times of duress or crisis is highest and are thus set up for failure (Reinwald et al., 2022)

Intersecting identities are common and often shape Black women's experiences, influencing motivations and pressures to shift likewise. It is important to provide an understanding of how Black women, construct and interpret their own personal experiences adding race and gender in organizations and leadership practices in absence of race and gender-based discrimination such as tokenism in the workplace (Dickens et al., 2019).

Women in leadership have had to capture coping and survival strategies of Black women that help navigate relational and environmental phenomena including spirit murder, emotional taxation, social closure, White privilege, and White fragility (Erskine et al., 2021). Institutional logics are in place that compel this population to cope, endure, and survive in their careers while navigating through disproportionate environments. Research (2021) showed strategies for women to attain power currency as well as shows managers how to develop cultures that minimize incivility, adopt a positive deviance framework, embrace a critical management stance, incorporate intersectionality awareness into organizational strategies, and develop more relevant and effective sponsorship, mentorship, and coaching practice. Specifically, resilience has proven to be a protective factor in promoting leadership development for ethnic minorities and women. Though challenging and even devastating, adversity has been shown to produce positive results for many, producing transformative experiences (Chance, 2021a).

Although the aforementioned research regarding Black women in professional leadership roles (dean and above) in institutions of higher learning, illuminate important findings, I have found no research that has examined experiences of bias and barriers in

the academic setting. These factors have not been widely documented and little research exists that attends to the experiences and perspectives of Black women in senior leadership (Gamble & Turner, 2015). Given such, further research is warranted that could examine bias and barriers to address the documented problem of prohibited or limited advancement in institutions of higher learning for this population (Morley & Walsh, 2021).

Problem Statement

Research on Black women in leadership at institutions of higher learning focuses primarily on feminist principles with limited contributions to the understanding of the perceived degree of bias and barriers that Black women face in these positions (Chance, 2021b). Historically, Black women have emerged as leaders in academia, organizations, nonprofits, and government agencies. Specifically, Black women have made meaningful strides in leadership advancement in higher education; however, this progress has not been without challenges (Chance, 2021). Although Black women are entering leadership roles at increasing rates, this population remains underrepresented in higher education (Smith et al, 2018; Thomas, 2019). For Black women, advancement challenges have left them marginalized as most theories regarding position advancement have been formed based on the experiences of White women (McKinsey & Company, 2020). Numerous articles can be found about the need to better support Black women in leadership who are experiencing underrepresentation, intersectionality, and leadership development challenges.

Despite the surge in numbers of Black women leaders in professional leadership roles (dean and above) in institutions of higher learning, the growth trajectory remains disproportionate. Oppressive bias and barriers develop into hindrances and advancement stagnation towards upward mobility for Black women pursuing senior leadership roles (Davis & Maldonado, 2015). Black women remain absent in positions of authority where they can shape and influence change. This disproportioned growth trajectory for Black women indicates a gap in knowledge and understanding of experiences of bias and barriers to addressing the documented problem of prohibited or limited advancement in institutions of higher learning (Morley & Walsh, 2021).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this general qualitative study was to explore the experiences and perceptions of bias and barriers among Black women in professional leadership roles (dean and above) as they work to advance in institutions of higher learning. More specifically, I used interviewing to examine a view of the insights and encounters of Black women seeking possibilities or attaining the ability to advance beyond faculty positions. I examined the perceptible lack of equality that contributes to the problem of bias and privilege due to barriers to advancement. I sought to contribute to the discussion on leadership, diversity, inclusion, and access by identifying the factors that prevent Black women from attaining administrative positions at the same rate as other women. The goal was to help address and remove discriminatory barriers that prevented Black women from serving in roles in which they are qualified.

Research Question

The following research question guided the study to explore the experiences and perceptions of bias and barriers among Black women in professional leadership roles (dean and above) as they work to advance in institutions of higher learning.

What are the experiences and perceptions of bias and barriers among Black women in professional leadership roles (dean and above) as they work to advance in institutions of higher learning?

Theoretical Framework for the Study

The Black Feminist Thought (BFT) was the theoretical framework used to investigate the leadership experiences of Black women in higher education leadership. Patricia Hill Collins developed Black feminist thought to explore the ideas of Black feminist intellectuals as a way to help differentiate traditional feminist theory from women who experience racism and marginalization (Collins, 2018). This framework acknowledges the oppressive and discriminatory practices through which socialization processes were determined (Porter et al., 2019). Specifically, the socialization of Black women guides the construction of current models of identity development in Black women. BFT exposes the way that domination is organized, showing the struggle and empowerment (Alinia, 2015). This framework engages Black women in applying these principles to leverage this population's intersectional experiences (Rankin & Irish, 2020). Additional information on BFT was presented in Chapter 2.

The chosen theory can assist with identifying the factors that create structures of influence on behaviors that affect Black women. According to Collins (1990) BFT posits

that there are thoughts produced by Black women that offer a distinct feminine standpoint which emerges from the intersectionality of gender and race. It focuses on the oppression of Black women in America showing the bound between sexism, class oppression, and racism (Collins, 1990). BFT underscores that because Black women often experience marginalization, there is value in understanding the “outsider within” concept of Black women as intellectuals who have distinctive perspectives on political, social, academic, and economic realities (Collins, 1990).

BFT proposes that shared experiences of Black women differentiate them from other women producing a unique narrative or theme. In other words, Black women have a distinct experience of growth, development, and power compared to women of other races. This framework helped to reconceptualize the similarities and commonalities among Black women, shaped by their lived experiences creating a lens by which to view their unique perspectives. The goal is to help identify the narratives of Black women in leadership and their perspectives on administration in higher education. The BFT provides a clearer understanding of the employment conditions for Black women as well as social issues facing Black women in the workplace. It lends itself to ways women embody coping strategies and resilience despite their treatment. BFM is notably the discourse that fosters Black women’s survival, persistence, success against the odds (Collins, 2018). It asserts the core significance of the ways race, gender, class, and other social, cultural, and political markers are connected illustrating that Black women’s ideas and actions are central concerns for the future of advancement in higher education.

Nature of the Study

The qualitative design of this study is chosen to address the complex nuances of perceived bias and barriers among Black women in professional leadership roles within the context of higher education. The specific research design incorporated a generic qualitative approach primarily using interviews with Black women in professional leadership roles in this sector. I selected a qualitative design because the method allowed me to examine the in-depth dynamics and intricacies of personal and professional experiences in the noted positions. I was able to gather data through the actual experiences of the Black female leaders. This qualitative analysis helped improve the understanding of experiences and perceptions of a select group of Black women leaders in higher education. It aims to uncover the dynamics that shape their professional journeys and gain insights into the intersectionality of gender and race in the realm of leadership in higher education.

To gain profound data, I used purposive and snowball sampling techniques to recruit 8-10 Black female leaders in higher education with lived experiences related to bias, and barriers. Participant recruitment occurred from Black women in Leadership roles with firsthand perspectives on these issues. Data collection was through semistructured interviews with selected participants, research articles lived experiences of this population, and other relevant sources. The interviews allowed for flexible exploration of themes as they arise while maintaining structure that answer the research question. Research articles and other relevant data reflected the lived experiences of this

population as a whole seeking to provide a comprehensive view of the challenges and opportunities faced by Black women in leadership roles in higher education.

Primarily, the general thought is that this study contributed to insights on the ongoing discussion of diversity, equity, and inclusion in academic settings. It helped to offer recommendations to institutions who seek to explore support efforts and advancement possibilities for Black women in leadership.

Definitions

The following terms were identified and defined to enable the reader to understand the study. The definitions provided meanings associated with these terms for the purposes of this research study.

Barrier: The structural, cultural, and interpersonal obstacles that limit equitable access to leadership opportunities and advancement. In higher education, barriers may include systemic discrimination, limited mentorship, exclusionary networks, and biased evaluation processes that disproportionately affect Black women leaders (Gutierrez et al., 2025).

Bias: Systematic deviations or distortions, rooted in assumptions, power dynamics, or institutional practices, that influence how information is collected, interpreted, or valued. In higher education research and practice, bias can manifest in evaluation, promotion, or decision-making processes, often disadvantaging marginalized groups (Daskalopoulou, 2024).

Black: Personal, cultural, and political identity that is a racialized classification of people having origins in any Black racial groups of Africa (Burgett & Hendler, 2020).

Feminist theory: The Oxford Handbook of Feminist Theory defines this term as a diverse multidisciplinary field that examines how gender inequalities impact culture and society (Disch & Hawkesworth, 2015).

Black Feminist theory: A social theory that suggests that shared lived experiences and challenges can cultivate like perspectives leading to a unified viewpoint or collective knowledge that is necessary for informed social impact or social action (Collins, 1990).

Glass ceiling: This term is an invisible barrier that obstructs or hinders women from achieving higher education positions at the dean and above level (Taparia & Lenka, 2022).

Higher Education: The term, Higher Education refers to institutions providing study in post-secondary education, such as colleges and universities, community colleges, and vocational and technical schools, leading to a bachelor's degree or higher (American Law Library, 2018).

Historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs): A school of higher learning that was accredited and established before 1964, and whose primary mission is the education of African American students (Ryan & Haslam, 2007).

Intersectionality: This is a metaphor used for understanding the ways that multiple forms of inequality or disadvantage may compound themselves resulting in obstacles that often are not understood among conventional ways of thinking (Crenshaw, 2019).

Marginalization: The systematic exclusion or relegation of particular groups or individuals to a marginal or peripheral position within a society or group, denying or

limiting them access to resources, opportunities, and power, based on numerous factors, including race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, age, religion, or other characteristics (Sevelius et al., 2020).

Outsider within: Term coined by Sociologist Patricia Hill Collins to describe the Black women or minority academics who occupy a marginal position in dominant group settings (Collins, 2004).

Social impact: Shift in human interaction that transform the existing cultural and social landscape of value systems, social organization, and practices (Laranjo, 2016).

Assumptions

Several basic assumptions are to be considered in this study. The first assumption is that the participants are highly educated professionals who have a strong background in higher education and thus understand, and practice leadership competencies based on their experience and educational background. I assume that they understood the interview questions and were able to respond to them capably. I assumed participants would answer authentically, openly, and honestly. I assumed that a sample size of eight-10 participants would be sufficient for exploring the role of Black Women in Higher Education leadership positions. These assumptions are important in the context of the student to provide clarity, reliability, and validity to the overall research process.

Scope and Delimitations

The scope of the study consisted of exploring and identifying the types of biases Black women perceive they face in leadership roles in academia. The study also sought to understand the specific barriers that hinder Black women from ascending in leadership

roles, focusing only on Black women in leadership roles at the dean or above levels. It sought to assess the impact of these biases and barriers on professional growth and development as well as mental health and job satisfaction. Lastly, the study sought to investigate the strategies and support systems Black women utilize to overcome these challenges. Studies have shown a sizable underrepresentation of Black women in leadership positions. Despite increasing numbers of institutions across America, Black women remain significantly underrepresented in leadership roles at the dean or above levels highlighting a more persistent gap in diverse representation of leaders (Morley & Walsh, 2021). The overarching goal is to develop recommendations for institutions to create more inclusive and supportive environments for Black women leaders. The investigation of leadership development, career progression, and intersectionality are focus areas to be explored in the research.

Delimitations are identified as what the researcher includes or restricts from the research study including variables such as population, research design, tools, techniques, and other variables (Jha, 2023). The delimitations of a study are the use of purposive sampling to only select participants who are Black women and hold or have held leadership roles at the dean or above level. This limited population cannot represent all women of all ethnicities, other occupations outside of academia, or locations. The focus was to explain the research in a detailed manner where readers can find similarities within other environments that can be applied to different settings.

It is also important to acknowledge possible researcher bias as a delimitation as the researcher's own experiences as a Black woman employed by an institutional of

higher education. This could result in skewed focus on the experiences of Black female leaders, potentially limiting the generalizability of the research results. Mitchell and Shivde (2023) posited that generalizability, or external validity attempts to explore how humans behave in various situations and why notably seeking an end goal of being able to predict or possibly control said behavior. To mitigate the risk of researcher bias, bracketing measures were used to minimize personal biases and increase objectivity (Tufford & Newman, 2010).

Delimitations may also include the decision to obtain data from respondents in specific areas or school types such as Predominantly White Institutions (PWI) or Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU).

Limitations

Research limitations are those parts of the methodology that influenced data interpretation (Price & Murnan, 2004). The approach used for this study was open-ended data collecting using interviewing to help gather high-quality information. This study does not represent the thoughts and experiences of all Black women leaders in higher education; however, it represents challenges Black women leaders have encountered. Only Black women were studied thus there is no comparison between the experiences of Black and White women in the same roles at the represented institutions.

A significant limitation of the study is also the potential for researcher bias as the researcher, I am a Black female in a higher education leadership position. It is imperative that the research remain neutral to ensure credibility of data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Likewise, limitations on resources, time, and complexities of the world can be identified

when conducting a study. Subsequently, data limitations include distorted biases, or planned responses as interviews can be distorted based on the emotional state of the interviewee at the time. In addition, recall, error, and self-serving purposes cannot be left. All participant responses are self-reported, and participants of the study are volunteers who are leaders in PWIs. The findings are thus limited to those professionals.

Access to participants may be a limitation for this study. The study involved Black women in higher educational institutions who are leaders at the dean or above level. Although the numbers of Black women in leadership are rising, there remains a sparse number of persons in these roles. It is noted that Black women in higher education have different experiences regarding a struggle for acceptance, equity, and respect (Collins, 2018). Due to the need to protect their roles, some women may not be willing to participate in the study. In addition, contact information may be incomplete or inaccurate, which could also lead to the inability to secure a large pool of participants.

Significance

This study is significant in that it lessened the gap in understanding the various challenges and barriers faced by Black women in higher education leadership roles by focusing specifically on the biases and barriers of this population. The results of the study helped employers understand the challenges of addressing hiring and support practices needed for this population. Although research has been gathered to examine the gaps in leadership advancement for Black women, this study helped to better understand the experiences and perceptions of Black women who have gained leadership opportunities in higher education at the dean and above level. Value is added to the field of human

services in highlighting the complexities of advancement for Black women in higher education. By understanding the perceived bias and barriers of this population, institutions and leaders may be able to reframe their hiring and promotion practices. This study provided strategies that help Black women persist in their pursuit of advanced roles in higher education while helping to demystify the types of systemic biases and barriers presented.

Implications for Social impact

Critical implications for social impact resulting from this study are significant and multifaceted. I sought to provide insights that can drive transformative changes within higher education institutions, primarily by providing increased awareness and understanding among leaders and hiring teams. It can cast a proverbial light on the challenges Black women encounter in leadership roles creating support from policymakers, administrators, faculty, and students. These stakeholders can better recognize and address the systemic biases that exist and impact Black women in these roles.

The research can also imply policy references leading to the development and implementation of institutional policies focused on reducing biases and barriers. Policies that include recruitment, retention, promotion, and support for Black women. Creating diverse hiring teams, bias training, transparent promotion processes and the creation of mentorship and sponsorship programs specifically designed for this population, higher educational institutions can create a more impartial environment. This lends opportunity

to promote diversity and inclusion initiatives that support the advancement of Black women overall in all roles.

Academically, this study can inform evidence-based practices making significant contributions to research and scholarship. This helps to provide a strong foundation for further research and scholarship. Likewise, it provides valuable insights for developing practices that support Black women's success and well-being in higher education.

Overall, the study's findings have the potential to effect positive social impact by empowering women to take on leadership roles validating their experiences and by providing them with tools and support needed to overcome the barriers they face. These implications can transcend beyond higher education into other sectors hailing as a contributor to the greater societal reach. By addressing these implications, this student can contribute to meaning change that contributes to the advancement of social impact, diversity, equality, inclusion, and belonging. It has the potential to transform leadership as we currently know it.

Summary

The biases and barriers of Black women's experiences and perspectives in leadership are limited in scope. The narratives of these perspectives have traditionally been cultivated from the perspective of White males in higher education institutions (Collins, 1990). Other studies have addressed the experiences of Black women in institutions outside of the leadership track at dean and above levels however few have focused on the biases and barriers that contribute to the limited number of Black women who hold these positions.

Chapter 1 includes information on the rationale for exploring perceived bias and barriers to leadership opportunities for Black women in higher education. Black feminist thought (Collins, 1990) provided a framework to understand Black women individually and as a group. This framework was used to explain the densities of the biases and barriers Black women face while working in higher education institutions as well as the data from the interviews. I showed that there was a lack of research on the topic and additional research is warranted.

It is desired that this study generates awareness of the unique experiences of Black women in higher education institutions. During the review of the literature, it is noted that Black women may be able to resist the challenges they encounter through resilience, advocacy, and allyship. In Chapter 2, I provided a comprehensive review of the relevant literature on the study topic and the theoretical framework as well as discuss the literature search strategy. Chapter 3 included the research methods selected for the study as well as the potential ethical and trustworthiness concerns of the research. In Chapter 4, I discussed the results of the student, and Chapter 5 included a summary, consultation, and recommendations for future research.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

This chapter provides a review of literature pertaining to perceived bias and barriers among Black women in professional leadership roles. The topic of Black women in leadership has become of central importance since the mid 19th century, however it was not until the 1970s that Black feminism was termed (Collins, 1990; Hooks, 1999). Although Black women in professional leadership roles remain disproportionality underrepresented; their resilience, community support, and targeted leadership development are contributors to access for the disparate achievement of this population (Colby, 2020).

Scholarly research about Black women in leadership has begun to look more closely at challenges. Studies show Black women in academic leadership positions experience institutional bias through racism and sexism, leading to professional isolation, undervalued contributions, and limited advancement opportunities. Despite recent progress, significant gaps remain in the representation of Black women, particularly in academia, where their presence in university administration and faculty leadership positions stands at less than 5% (McChesney, 2018). More alarming is the decline of the promotion rate of racial and ethnic minorities, while White men continue to experience upward mobility (College and university professional association for human resources [CUPA-HR], 2021). These statistics underscore the importance of exploring how Black women navigate institutional bias and structural barriers in their pursuit of leadership roles, a key focus of this study. The study aimed to investigate how Black women have

navigated bias and barriers to securing higher educational leadership positions through narrative reflections of their experiences. The purpose of this student is to understand bias and barriers among Black women in professional leadership roles as they work to advance in institutions of higher learning.

Researchers have reported that Black women leaders in higher education work in environments frequently experience isolation, tokenism, and various forms of discrimination, including racism and sexism that due to their relative encounters (Chance, 2021). This chapter includes a discussion of BFT and how it relates to Black women in higher education leadership. BFT provides a critical lens through which to examine these experiences, highlighting the unique interplay of race and gender in shaping their leadership journeys (Collins, 2022). However, there is a lack of clear documentation on whether the strategies employed by Black women to navigate these environments are beneficial or detrimental in the long term.

Much of the existing literature fails to address how mentorship, sponsorship, and other forms of support can aid in closing the racial and gender gaps in leadership representation (Parker, 2015). This chapter aims to provide a foundation for understanding the specific challenges faced by Black women in professional leadership, particularly in higher education, and to review the relevant literature on how these women have used resilience, fortitude, and strategic development to fuel their upward trajectory. Further research is necessary to illuminate the full scope of these barriers and the mechanisms for overcoming them, particularly for future generations of Black women aspiring to leadership roles. Representation of Black women in higher education is noted

as a disparity thus focus should be placed on mentorship and sponsorship strategies to those aiming for roles in this area (Henry & Glenn, 2017).

Literature Search Strategy

A comprehensive literature review was conducted to identify research related to the perceived bias and barriers experienced by Black women in higher education leadership. This review involved a systematic search using a combination of targeted keywords and search terms to ensure a thorough exploration of relevant scholarship. The primary resources utilized for this review were peer-reviewed articles, dissertations, books, and other scholarly publications. Access to these materials was primarily obtained through Walden University's library, which provided extensive access to academic databases and repositories. Key databases included Academic Search Complete, APA PsycInfo, the Chronicle of Higher Education, EBSCO ebooks, ERIC, ProQuest Central, ProQuest Digital Dissertations and Theses Global, Sage Journals, ScholarWorks, and Thoreau Multi-Database Search.

Search terms and titles included a wide range of topics aligned to the research question such as *Black women, African American women, educational leadership, higher education, bias, barriers, and challenges of Black Women, Black women in academia, Black women in higher education leadership, academic leadership, lived experiences, women in higher education leadership, women making strides in higher education, Black women and transformational leadership, professional leadership, professional women and equality, resilience, self-efficacy, feminist theory, black feminist thought, imposter syndrome, tokenism, isolation and leadership, institutional barriers, glass ceiling, glass*

cliff, mentorship, sponsorship and evaluation, role of mentorship in advancing in higher education, Black women deans, Black women university presidents, underrepresentation of Black women in higher education leadership, coping strategies, and intersectionality.

Additional strategies involved reviewing bibliographic citations, annotated bibliographies, and reference lists from books and other scholarly works to identify supplemental studies and ensure data saturation. The research yielded four key studies that align to the topic of perceived bias and barriers faced by Black women in higher educational leadership.

Theoretical Foundation

BFT) serves as the theoretical framework used to investigate the leadership experiences of Black women in higher education leadership. Developed by Patricia Hill Collins, BFT provides a critical lens through which the intersection of race, gender, and class can be examined, particularly for Black women who experience systemic oppression in both public and professional spaces (Collins, 2018). Collins introduced this theory to distinguish the unique struggles of Black women from those addressed by traditional feminist theories, which often fail to account for the compounded effects of racism and marginalization that Black women encounter (Collins, 2018). In her original literature, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, Collins (1990) compared the ideas of White feminism and Black feminism, emphasizing how Black women have been historically marginalized and “othered” in their academic, professional, and social environments. While all women

experience gender oppression, Black women face compounded barriers due to racism and classism, impacting their professional lives significantly.

BFT suggests that marginal positions in academia have been occupied by Black women for numerous years, coining the term “the outsiders within” as the best description of this group (Collins, 2002). Collins presented the theory that Black women work in a world where White males dominated the roles; thus, Black women are treated as outsiders. Additionally, this framework acknowledged the oppressive and discriminatory practices through which marginalization and socialization processes were determined (Collins, 1990). This term encapsulates the experience of Black women who have been structurally excluded from positions of power yet are expected to participate in systems where White men predominantly hold leadership roles. In academia, this exclusion manifests in the underrepresentation of Black women in leadership positions and their experiences of being socially and professionally isolated. BFT explores the broader societal structures that reinforce this marginalization, particularly the ways in which Black women’s roles and contributions are undervalued in predominantly White institutions (Collins, 1990).

By addressing both the systemic discrimination and exclusion that Black women face, BFT enables a deeper understanding of the challenges they encounter in higher education leadership, including tokenism, isolation, and exclusion from informal power networks that are often crucial for career advancement (Harley, 2007). Specifically, the socialization of Black women guided the construction of current models of identity development in Black women and provides a framework to explore connectedness. The

central premise of BFT is that self-definition and self-evaluation are necessary for Black women to overcome societal oppression (Collins, 1986). This framework purports that Black women must reclaim their voices and narratives in order to challenge the ideologies that render them invisible or subordinate in academic and professional spaces. BFT provides the tools to investigate how Black women leaders in higher education redefine their identities and leadership roles in contexts where they are often marginalized.

BFT assists with identifying the factors that create structures of influence on behaviors that affect Black women. BFT accounts for the unique individualized experiences of Black women, integrating perspectives of race, gender, intersectionality, and deconstruction of oppressive narratives. It helped to reconceptualize the experiences of Black women through the lenses of the participants. The goal was to help identify the narratives of Black women in leadership and their perspectives on administration in higher education. The BFT provides a clearer understanding of the employment conditions for Black women as well as social issues facing Black women in the workplace. According to BFT, Black women must navigate racism and sexism, resulting in different experiences than their male counterparts (Collins, 1990).

Most recently, classism has been added as a point of focus, thus adding to the intersectionality of all labels that welcome discrimination. This study outlines ways women embody coping strategies and resilience despite their treatment. This theoretical framework is critical for exploring how Black women's leadership experiences are shaped by their engagement with and resistance to oppressive structures that pervade

academia. Specifically, BFL enables the reconceptualization of Black women's leadership as a proves of empowerment within an environment that continually challenges their authority and legitimacy (Henry & Glenn, 2017). This study utilized BFT to explore the lived experiences of Black women in higher education leadership and to understand the ways in which they overcome bias and barriers to secure their positions within academia.

Black Women in Higher Education

History of Black Women in Higher Education

Feminism has been traced back to the mid 19th century, marked by significant milestones such as the Woman's Suffrage Movement which culminated the passage of the 19th amendment granting women the right to vote (McConaughy, 2013). The struggles of Black women in education date even further back, with origins in slavery as women defied oppressive systems by secretly learning to read and started teaching classes to share their knowledge with other slaves (Givens, 2021). As the first to be educated, these women were considered to be teachers of their siblings, spouses, children, and communities. Becoming educated created considerable criticism for them however, their resilience and personal determination expanded this leading to opportunities in higher education as teachers and administrators (West & Porter, 2023). This entry into higher education helped families conquer poverty as well as contribute to the broader education of the Black community, promoting collective advancement.

The intersection of race and gender oppression was notably addressed by Sojourner Truth in her famous "Ain't I a Woman?" speech at the 1851 Women's Rights

Convention. This speech provided a narrative for the oppression of Black women during a time when female fragility was rarely considered and were a mere reflection of the inequalities of the times. Truth's words gave voice to the unique struggles of Black women, influencing future frameworks such as Black Feminist Thought (BFT), which centers on the distinct experiences of Black women as they navigate racism and sexism within oppressive systems (Collins, 2002).

Historically, African American women have been involved in formal educational processes in meaningful ways despite challenges to their efforts (Becks-Moody, 2004). African American women's entry into higher education provided more of a means of "race uplift" and financial freedom in an effort to acquire freedom from discrimination and legal segregation (Noble, 1993, p. 87). Education became a critical field for Black women, as it was seen as a means for them to elevate themselves and empower their communities through knowledge and leadership (Bright, 2010). Numerous Black women entered institutions of higher education to become teachers, driven by the goal of contributing to the educational and social development of the Black community. This pursuit of higher education was not only a personal ambition but a form of community liberation, as Black women sought to dismantle the barriers that had long oppressed their gender as well as race (Noble, 1993).

Underrepresentation of Black Women in Higher Education Administration

Black women must navigate social perceptions to meet the cultural codes of the U.S. workplace. Notably, Black women have stated they share experiences of isolation, invisibility, indifference, and lack of understanding of minority experiences in higher

education. Climate and culture are said to be the differentiators in how they are treated among peers and the level of access and opportunities granted within leadership circles. Society barriers, conscious and unconscious bias, internal and structural, business, and governmental barriers are among barriers found. Likewise, Chance (2021) conducted a phenomenological study exploring how Black women in higher education leadership navigate cultural adversity. The study revealed that the intersection of race and gender presents significant challenges for Black women striving to present their authentic selves in academic leadership roles. Participants reported experiences of discrimination, identity struggles, and a persistent sense of not belonging, which collectively hinder their professional advancement. In addition to the intersect of race and gender creating barriers impacting development and advancement in higher education, Black women contend with internal challenges.

African American administrators have reported shared experiences of PWIs including isolation, invisibility, hostility, indifference, and lack of understanding of their and other minority individuals' experiences (Moses, 1989). In addition to these emotions, researchers discussed the campus climate issues they experienced as well as the relationships with their supervisors (Jackson et al., 2003). These challenges are compounded by microaggressions or subtle, often unintentional, discriminatory comments or behaviors, which create hostile work environments. Such environments not only impede professional growth but also contribute to emotional exhaustion and decreased job satisfaction among Black women leaders (Flowers-Taylor, 2021).

Campus climate was defined as exploring the perceived thoughts of students, faculty, and staff towards racial/ethnic diversity measured by structural diversity (Jackson & Flowers, 2003). Retention issues and concerns with African-American women increased throughout the years because of low expectations at work and not receiving promotions when these same women had been working in institutions for long periods of time. The cumulative effects of isolation and structural inequities not only impact career progression but also contribute to emotional exhaustion, leading to higher turnover rates among Black women in leadership positions within higher education.

Isolation

Isolation among Black women in higher education leadership is a multifaceted and deeply rooted issue that significantly affects their professional experiences, opportunities for advancement, and overall well-being. Extensive research confirms that Black women in academic leadership roles encounter a unique constellation of challenges shaped by both race and gender (Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010). In a phenomenological study, Chance (2021) found that Black women leaders often experience profound feelings of loneliness and alienation in academic environments. These sentiments arise from navigating institutional cultures that routinely marginalize their identities, scholarship, and contributions.

Isolation is not only emotional but institutional. It is one of the primary barriers identified by Black women in leadership, who frequently report challenges in being fully included within decision-making spaces and professional networks (Walser-Smith, 2019). This persistent isolation can manifest as feelings of invisibility, insecurity, and

voicelessness, contributing to elevated stress and reduced job satisfaction. Compounding these dynamics are negative perceptions surrounding Black women's qualifications, limited access to mentoring, and a lack of intentional sponsorship (Chance, 2021b). These conditions foster environments where Black women are often treated as symbolic representatives—tokens of diversity—rather than being regarded as valued and capable leaders.

The professional isolation experienced by Black women in leadership is frequently a byproduct of tokenism. As Johnson (2022) observed, isolation often becomes the "price" Black women pay for their ascent through the academic ranks. Though they may be granted a seat at the table, the absence of relational and cultural inclusion undermines the sense of belonging necessary for flourishing. Singh and Williams-Green (1995) argue that this lack of connection—both social and professional—can impair personal development, stifle innovation, and ultimately hinder career progression. Moreover, the resulting emotional toll can be severe, impacting mental health, morale, and resilience.

The structural nature of this isolation is further evidenced by degree attainment data. According to Stewart (2024), only 31.4% of Black women attain a college degree, compared to 43.6% of white women and 60.8% of Asian women. This significant disparity reflects a broader system of exclusion that contributes to the underrepresentation of Black women in higher education leadership—and to the deep feelings of disconnection they report when they do reach senior positions.

Isolation is also closely intertwined with impostor syndrome. The scarcity of Black women in senior academic leadership roles often reinforces a profound sense of alienation. Many report lacking access to mentors or colleagues who share their racial or gendered experiences, resulting in fewer affirmations of their competence and sense of belonging (Dixon, 2023). The absence of Black female role models further amplifies the belief that leadership is not designed for individuals who look like them. As Doggett (2019) noted, for Black individuals, impostor syndrome is not merely an internal voice of self-doubt—it is echoed and reinforced by daily societal messages that suggest they do not belong, especially when they are the only person of color in the room.

The concept of the “outsider-within,” articulated by Patricia Hill Collins, captures this duality of presence and marginalization (Breedan, 2021; Collins, 2000). Black women leaders are physically present in leadership roles yet are often denied full membership in institutional cultures and professional networks. This paradox reinforces their sense of otherness and intensifies their experiences of invisibility. Despite their proximity to power, they are frequently excluded from informal relationships and unspoken norms that facilitate influence and advancement.

Such exclusion is often compounded by daily microaggressions, racialized stereotypes, and systemic disregard for diverse leadership styles. The cumulative effect of these hostile or non-inclusive academic climates is detrimental. Black women who endure persistent microaggressions and a lack of institutional support often experience physical, emotional, psychological, and cognitive distress. Their accounts consistently reflect a sense of being alone—unseen, unheard, and unsupported within the very

institutions they serve. These dynamics are not only harmful but insidious, often leading individuals to internalize their marginalization as personal inadequacy rather than recognizing it as a result of systemic inequity (Collins, 2022).

Addressing these multifaceted challenges requires a paradigm shift within higher education. Institutions must move beyond performative inclusion and invest in structural reforms that prioritize equity and psychological safety. Key interventions include the establishment of culturally responsive mentorship and sponsorship programs, the implementation of inclusive leadership training, and the development of affinity networks that allow Black women leaders to connect, collaborate, and thrive.

Moreover, leadership pathways must be intentionally restructured to dismantle barriers that perpetuate isolation and reinforce impostor syndrome. Institutions must cultivate environments that validate the lived experiences of Black women, celebrate their contributions, and affirm their belonging. When Black women are supported, seen, and meaningfully included, both their personal development and institutional outcomes are enriched.

Isolation remains one of the most pervasive and damaging barriers faced by Black women in higher education leadership. It is both a cause and a consequence of underrepresentation, structural bias, and tokenism. Its effects ripple across emotional, psychological, and professional domains, feeding into impostor syndrome and undermining leadership efficacy. Acknowledging and addressing this reality with intentionality is critical to fostering environments that genuinely support the advancement and well-being of Black women leaders in academia.

Imposter Syndrome

Impostor syndrome, originally coined as the “impostor phenomenon” by psychologists Clance and Imes in 1978, refers to a psychological pattern in which high-achieving individuals experience chronic self-doubt and a persistent belief that they are intellectual frauds, despite clear evidence of their competence and success. Those who struggle with impostor feelings often find it difficult to internalize their accomplishments, attributing their success to external factors such as luck, timing, or deception. This leads to a pervasive fear of being “found out” as inadequate or unqualified. Common manifestations of impostor syndrome include self-doubt, fear of exposure, perfectionism, and self-sabotaging behaviors such as procrastination or over-preparation (Georgiadis, 2020).

While impostor syndrome can affect individuals across a wide range of demographic groups and professional contexts, it holds particular salience in discussions of intersectionality. Emerging research reveals that impostor feelings do not occur in a vacuum and are significantly shaped by social identity and structural inequities. Scholars emphasize that these feelings are magnified at the intersection of race and gender, particularly for people of color. In this sense, impostor syndrome “interacts with racial discrimination,” becoming more pronounced when gender-based pressures converge with racialized experiences of exclusion and bias (Doggett, 2019).

For Black women in academia, this convergence often results in what scholars describe as *racialized impostor syndrome*—a compounded experience in which self-doubt is fueled not only by internalized expectations of perfection but also by repeated

encounters with racism, microaggressions, and systemic marginalization in academic and professional environments (Cokley et al., 2024). Social psychologist Cokley (2024, 2017) argued that impostor syndrome among people of color is often not merely an internal pathology but rather a direct reaction to external conditions, including implicit bias, tokenism, and institutionalized exclusion. According to Cokley (2024), these persistent messages of unbelonging make it difficult for Black professionals to fully embrace their success, particularly when they operate in spaces that continuously signal that they are not welcome or legitimate. Thus, any examination of impostor syndrome among Black women in higher education leadership must account for the intersection of race and gender, understanding how these overlapping systems of oppression cultivate and reinforce impostor feelings.

In academic leadership settings, impostor syndrome manifests in distinctive and often debilitating ways for Black women. A central expression is the profound sense of not belonging in institutional spaces that have historically excluded both women and people of African descent. Black women leaders frequently report feeling like outsiders who must constantly navigate professional landscapes where they are simultaneously hyper-visible and invisible—hyper-visible as symbolic tokens of diversity, yet invisible in terms of substantive influence, authentic engagement, and institutional support (Fourtané, 2021).

This paradox of visibility often results in increased scrutiny from peers, subordinates, and superiors. Many Black women leaders internalize the idea that any mistake or perceived shortcoming will confirm negative stereotypes, contributing to

performance anxiety, perfectionism, and emotional exhaustion. The familiar adage that Black women must “work twice as hard to get half as far” reflects the relentless pressure to overperform in order to compensate for biased expectations. According to a recent study by McKinsey and Company (2020), approximately two-thirds of Black professionals reported feeling the need to work harder than their colleagues to advance in their careers. Furthermore, 58% report experiencing direct racial prejudice in the workplace—conditions that are not limited to the corporate sector but are mirrored in academia, where hierarchical structures and tenure systems often replicate broader patterns of social exclusion.

For Black women in academic leadership, this constant scrutiny reinforces impostor feelings, creating a feedback loop in which their achievements are continually questioned—by others and by themselves. Many attribute their success to luck, timing, or diversity initiatives, rather than to their capabilities and qualifications. When Black women rarely see others who look like them in senior roles, the lack of representation reinforces a narrative that leadership is not a natural or expected place for them. This systemic underrepresentation sends implicit messages about who is deemed worthy of influence, further undermining Black women’s confidence in their legitimacy and eroding their leadership identity (Georgiadis, 2020).

Perceived bias is deeply entangled with the impostor experience. Black women in academia are often subject to both overt and covert stereotypes that question their intellectual capacity, professional aptitude, and emotional composure. These stereotypes—such as the “angry Black woman,” the “mammy,” or the “diversity hire”—

persist in academic settings, despite growing awareness of equity and inclusion (Cokley et al., 2024) Dixon (2023) noted that such controlling images are not only harmful but also pervasive, shaping how Black women are perceived by colleagues, students, and administrators. These distorted perceptions interfere with leadership behavior, eroding self-confidence and fueling anxiety around competence and advancement. When Black women are aware that their qualifications may be undervalued or misattributed to affirmative action, it becomes exceedingly difficult to fully trust in their accomplishments or to project authentic authority.

Unlike purely internalized forms of self-doubt, impostor syndrome in this context is often a direct reaction to environmental hostility. As Hawley (2019) contended, hostile social environments may produce obstacles to self-knowledge that make impostor feelings more than just internal pathology. Black women in leadership frequently report feeling pressure to be flawless in order to be regarded as equal to their peers. Minor mistakes, which might be overlooked for others, are more harshly scrutinized when made by a Black woman, reinforcing the need for constant self-monitoring and emotional labor (Burton & Weiner, 2020). This dynamic aligns with broader research showing that women of color are disproportionately denied the benefit of the doubt in performance evaluations and are less likely to receive mentorship and institutional support than their white or male counterparts (Bohnet, Hauser, & Kristal, 2025). The persistent pressure to conform to dominant cultural and professional standards while masking one's authentic identity contributes to emotional exhaustion, heightened stress, and feelings of alienation in academic environments (Fields & Cunningham-Williams, 2021; Showunmi, 2023).

Together, these findings illustrate how impostor experiences among Black women leaders are shaped by structural bias and systemic inequities rather than individual deficits. One coping strategy often employed is to "suffer in silence"—a phenomenon highlighted by Liao (2019), who found that many Black women conceal their insecurities and impostor feelings for fear that expressing vulnerability will confirm others' biases about their lack of capability. This silence, while protective in the short term, can be isolating and ultimately counterproductive. It prevents Black women leaders from accessing the support they need and reinforces the impostor narrative that they must navigate professional life alone, without showing weakness or uncertainty. Over time, this chronic stress and internal conflict may lead to burnout, disengagement, and attrition.

Addressing impostor syndrome among Black women leaders in higher education requires a multifaceted approach that includes both personal empowerment and structural reform. At the individual level, the cultivation of mentoring relationships and affinity-based support networks can play a transformative role. Such networks provide safe spaces for affirmation, resource-sharing, and authentic dialogue, enabling Black women to validate their experiences, develop their leadership identities, and counteract the sense of isolation that often accompanies their roles. Access to senior mentors, particularly those who share racial or gendered identities, can disrupt the internalized belief that one is alone in their struggle and foster a greater sense of belonging.

On a systemic level, institutions must commit to dismantling the organizational conditions that cultivate impostor syndrome. This includes implementing equitable hiring and promotion practices, providing leadership development programs that center racial

and gender inclusivity, and cultivating a campus climate that values and uplifts the contributions of diverse leaders. Bias training for faculty, administrators, and staff must move beyond performative gestures to engage deeply with the ways in which structural racism and sexism shape perceptions of competence and leadership.

Fields and Cunningham-Williams (2021), in their case study on Black female faculty at research-intensive institutions, underscored that Black women "cannot survive and thrive in [academic] education unless institutions build trust with them" by respecting and affirming their diverse backgrounds, scholarship, and leadership styles. Their findings affirm that impostor syndrome is not merely a personal hurdle but a byproduct of systemic marginalization. Reducing the impact of impostor syndrome therefore demands accountability from institutions to change the very environments that create and sustain it.

Impostor syndrome remains a deeply entrenched and insidious barrier to Black women's advancement in higher education leadership. Its origins are not solely internal but are rooted in structural inequities, biased perceptions, and exclusionary cultures that question the legitimacy of Black women's authority and contributions. Combating this phenomenon requires both recognizing its racialized and gendered dimensions and implementing targeted strategies to foster environments where Black women can lead with authenticity and confidence. (Johnson & Fournillier, 2021). Only by addressing the intersecting forces of bias, scrutiny, and isolation can academia fully embrace and benefit from the transformative leadership of Black women.

Tokenism

Tokenism presents a profound challenge for Black women in higher education leadership, reinforcing both racial and gender biases that limit their influence and exacerbate the barriers they encounter in their professional trajectories. Rooted in the work of Kanter (1977), tokenism describes the practice of including members of marginalized groups, such as Black women, in leadership roles to create the appearance of diversity without granting them the same access to power or influence as their White male counterparts. In academic leadership, tokenism often manifests when Black women are appointed to leadership roles primarily to satisfy institutional diversity goals rather than due to their qualifications or leadership potential (Flores & Rhames, 2025). This dynamic positions Black women as hyper-visible within predominantly White institutions while simultaneously rendering them invisible when it comes to decision-making and substantive leadership opportunities (Iheduru-Anderson et al., 2024).

The effects of tokenism are multifaceted. First, it subjects Black women leaders to heightened scrutiny and disproportionate pressure to represent their entire race or gender in predominantly White spaces, which leads to the burden of racial and gendered representation (Iheduru-Anderson et al., 2022; Parker, 2015). Black women in these positions often feel the weight of expectation not only to perform their professional roles but also to be role models for other women of color, a responsibility that is not equally placed on their White peers (Chancellor, 2019). As a result, they are frequently expected to serve as cultural ambassadors or diversity experts, a role that can distract from their primary leadership responsibilities and lead to burnout (Pedota et al., 2025).

Tokenism also perpetuates exclusionary practices within academic leadership. Although Black women may occupy leadership roles, they are often excluded from informal power networks and mentoring relationships that are critical to career advancement in academia (Jean-Marie et al., 2009). These networks are often dominated by White men, who have more access to institutional resources and opportunities for leadership development (Wingfield, 2010). The isolation that results from tokenism can create a hostile work environment, where Black women struggle to find allies and sponsors who can support their professional growth, further reinforcing the barriers to their success (Harley, 2007). Additionally, tokenism undermines the credibility of Black women leaders, as their peers may perceive them as having been selected solely to fulfill a diversity requirement rather than for their skills and achievements (Iheduru-Anderson, 2025). This perception diminishes their authority and can hinder their effectiveness as leaders.

Tokenism intersects with broader issues of systemic racism and sexism, making it difficult for Black women to challenge the status quo or implement meaningful changes within their institutions. As tokens, they are often placed in precarious positions, where their marginalization limits their capacity to address institutional inequities (Iheduru-Anderson, 2025). This dynamic contributes to the "glass cliff" phenomenon, where Black women are appointed to leadership roles during periods of institutional crisis, only to be blamed if they fail to turn the organization around (Ryan & Haslam, 2007). Such challenges highlight the complex and often contradictory position that Black women

occupy in academia, where they are simultaneously expected to diversify leadership yet are constrained by the very structures that marginalize them.

Tokenism not only reinforces existing biases and barriers but also creates additional layers of professional and emotional labor for Black women in leadership. Their experiences are marked by the constant navigation of being seen as symbolic representatives of diversity rather than as competent, autonomous leaders. Addressing the effects of tokenism requires a deeper institutional commitment to dismantling the systems of exclusion and bias that sustain it, as well as creating supportive environments where Black women in leadership are genuinely empowered to succeed.

Institutional Barriers

The advancement of Black women into professional leadership roles has long been obstructed by institutional barriers, notably the concepts known as the glass ceiling and the glass cliff (Adamovic & Leibbrandt, 2024). These metaphors highlight systemic inequalities that prevent qualified individuals, especially Black women, from ascending to and thriving in top-level positions, regardless of their academic credentials, professional experience, or demonstrated competency. Glass ceilings are identified as barriers faced by Black women and minorities face when seeking professional leadership positions without respect of their qualifications insert citation.

The Glass Ceiling Act of 1991 was created to conduct a study and make recommendations regarding eliminating advancement barriers and increase opportunities and experiences for this population to secure positions in business (Glass Ceiling Commission, 1991). The glass ceiling is noted as a line of demarcation for those who are

successful and those who fall short. It is the invisible upper limit in institutions, corporations, and other organizations that compresses a woman's ability to advance. More specifically, the U.S. Department of Labor defines the glass ceiling as "those artificial barriers based on attitudinal or organizational bias that prevent qualified individuals from advancing upward in their organization into senior-level positions).

Black women are particularly impacted by the glass ceiling, often facing compounded biases due to both race and gender. This intersectional discrimination not only limits access to high-ranking roles but also diminishes professional development opportunities, equitable mentorship, and executive sponsorship. Despite being highly educated, Black women remain significantly underrepresented in senior leadership (Babic & Hansez, 2021). According to a 2023 McKinsey and Company report, Black women make up only 1.4% of C-suite executives in the United States, a stark contrast to the disproportionately high representation of White men, who occupy the majority of such roles.

In addition to the glass ceiling, Black women are also frequently subjected to what has been termed the glass cliff. This phenomenon occurs when women, particularly women of color, are appointed to leadership roles during times of organizational crisis or decline (Kruse, 2022; McGee, 2024). These precarious positions come with heightened scrutiny, limited support, and a high risk of failure, setting the stage for scapegoating or dismissal if outcomes are not immediately positive. The glass cliff thus compounds the difficulties Black women face, offering advancement only in contexts that are fraught with instability and uncertainty.

These institutional barriers are not confined to corporate environments but are also deeply embedded in academia and higher education. While Black women make up a growing segment of students and faculty in postsecondary institutions, they are grossly underrepresented in senior administrative and executive leadership positions. According to the American Council on Education (2022), only 5% of college and university presidents are women of color, with Black women representing a fraction of that number.

The barriers posed by the glass ceiling and glass cliff are deeply embedded within organizational structures, and they disproportionately hinder the professional advancement of Black women (Kruse, 2022). While these challenges are significant, so too are the opportunities for institutional transformation through equitable practices, intentional leadership development, and structural support systems. Addressing these barriers requires not only awareness but actionable commitment at all levels of leadership.

Opportunities for Black Women in Higher Education

Mentorship/Sponsorship

To counteract disparities faced by Black women in leadership, targeted strategies such as mentorship and sponsorship are essential. Mentorship provides guidance, support, and career advice, but sponsorship goes a step further by involving influential leaders who actively advocate for a protégé's advancement (e.g., by recommending them, opening doors, or advocating on their behalf). For Black women, securing sponsors who are willing to use their power to open doors can be transformative in navigating institutional barriers (Chance, 2021b). Moreover, Black women leaders often rely on

culturally grounded coping strategies to manage the emotional and psychological toll of systemic bias. These strategies may include relying on spiritual and religious practices, engaging in professional networks that affirm their identity, and participating in affinity groups that provide emotional and strategic support. Resilience, self-advocacy, and strategic alliance-building are key tools Black women use to navigate and resist institutional limitations.

Recent empirical work underscores how limited access to sponsorship impedes the advancement of women and women of color more broadly. A mixed-methods study in the healthcare sector found that sponsorship and mentoring support were instrumental in helping African Americans overcome systemic barriers to leadership advancement (Bush, 2025). Similarly, Cylan and Mnzile (2024) emphasized that sponsorship is essential for converting mentoring into actual career mobility and for addressing structural inequities hindering women's representation in senior roles.

In higher education and related professional domains, qualitative studies of Black women academic leaders reveal how mentorship is perceived and experienced under conditions of race and gender bias. For example, in academic nursing, Black women leaders described the importance of being both mentored and mentoring others to navigate institutional obstacles. A review of mentoring practices in higher education also identifies key "mentoring elements for success" tailored for Black women, advocating for institutionalization of mentoring strategies across consortia and national networks (Robinson, 2023).

However, the difference sponsorship makes, even above and beyond mentoring, is rarely guaranteed. Women of color, including Black women, often report that mentorship alone is insufficient without advocates in positions of power who can intervene on their behalf. In leadership development contexts (e.g., occupational therapy), a small-scale qualitative study observed that sponsorship and mentorship have implications beyond a person's leadership development, particularly when one's work is visible to gatekeepers in the organization (Nirmul et al., 2023).

For Black women aspiring to and occupying leadership roles in higher education, securing access to both mentorship and sponsorship is not optional but essential. Institutional efforts should intentionally scaffold pathways to sponsors, particularly from majority-group leaders, to help counteract entrenched gatekeeping and exclusionary norms.

At the same time, Black women leaders frequently draw on culturally grounded coping strategies to manage the emotional and psychological burden of systemic bias. These strategies include spiritual or religious practices, engagement in identity-affirming professional networks or affinity groups, resilience-building, self-advocacy, and forming strategic alliances or coalitions. In higher education settings, qualitative narratives highlight how Black women lean on community and relational support systems to sustain their careers. Flores and Rhames (2025) situated how women of color persist through institutional barriers by building support networks and pushing for structural change.

Moreover, quantitative work on the "strong Black woman" (SBW) schema documents how Black women engage in identity shifting, modulating expressions of

strength, vulnerability, and culture depending on the context, to protect their mental health and professional viability. This process reflects a kind of strategic emotional labor enacted in response to racialized gendered expectations (Hall, et al., 2025).

Collectively, these coping approaches, rooted in identity, community, and resilience, complement formal sponsorship/mentorship structures, enabling Black women to persist, resist, and thrive in leadership roles amidst institutional constraints.

Intersectionality

Intersectionality, a term coined by Crenshaw (2022), provides a critical framework for examining how the multiple, overlapping systems of oppression, power, and structural inequities that Black women experience due to their intersecting identities of race, gender, and class (Crenshaw, 2022). Though Crenshaw first articulated the concept in the late 1980s, its theoretical and empirical applications have continued to evolve. Defined as the interconnected nature in which social categories such as race, class, and gender intersect, intersectionality illuminates how these overlapping identities produce distinct and compounded experiences of discrimination. Crenshaw introduced the concept in her seminal work on how the law responds to cases of racial and gender discrimination, highlighting the inadequacy of treating race and gender as separate categories of analysis (Crenshaw, 2019). She argued that Black women often face double discrimination, where both gender and race create unique barriers not addressed by policies designed to protect either one in isolation. For instance, legal frameworks addressing anti-discrimination often compartmentalize race and gender, failing to

recognize the compounded effect of these identities, which can result in Black women being left without adequate recourse for justice.

Recent leadership and organizational scholarship have deepened the intersectional lens to examine how Black women's navigation of higher education institutions cannot be understood through single-axis frameworks alone. A recent systematic literature review on intersectional leadership highlights how intersectionality adds explanatory power for understanding how structural and interpersonal dynamics differently impact multiply marginalized leaders (Sim & Bierema, 2024). Within academic contexts, Ramdeo (2023) showed how race and gender identities simultaneously constrain Black women educators, producing forms of intersectional invisibility that erode recognition, inclusion, and voice. Navigating gendered, racialized pathways to leadership is more nuanced and multiplicative for Black women than for white women or Black men (Johnson, 2022a).

Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality brought to light the inadequacies of anti-discrimination law, which traditionally addressed either racial or gender bias separately, rather than considering how these forms of bias intersect (Crenshaw, 2019). This compartmentalization has historically marginalized Black women, whose experiences of discrimination do not fit neatly into one category or the other. Intersectionality challenges these traditional approaches by emphasizing that Black women face unique forms of oppression that cannot be fully understood by looking at race or gender in isolation (Collins & Bilge, 2016). While intersectionality had long been recognized in educational contexts, Crenshaw's work was pivotal in articulating how legal frameworks and societal

structures fail to address the compounded impact of multiple marginalized identities, sparking a movement to rethink race and gender discrimination in a more integrated way (Carbado & Gulati, 2013).

Intersectionality also explains well-documented empirical phenomena such as double jeopardy or additive disadvantage, whereby Black women anticipate and experience both racial and gender discrimination simultaneously. For example, a study on intersectional invisibility found that Black women are often perceived as neither prototypical Black (by racial standards) nor prototypical women (by gender standards), leading to their systematic exclusion from both reference groups (Billups et al. (2022). In higher education leadership specifically, intersectionality illustrates how equity initiatives focused on either “women’s advancement” or “racial equity” in isolation frequently fail to redress the compounded inequities faced by Black women. Weiner et al, (2022) described Black female principals experienced gendered racial bias shaped their recruitment and promotion opportunities in ways that could not be understood by examining race or gender independently.

Crenshaw's framework has since been expanded and applied to numerous fields, including education and leadership studies, where Black women continue to face structural and institutional barriers rooted in both racial and gendered inequities (Pogrebna et al., 2024). In higher education, intersectionality provides a critical lens for understanding how Black women are marginalized, not simply due to their race or gender alone, but through the intersection of these and other identities, such as socioeconomic status and sexual orientation. This intersectionality worsens work-life imbalance, as they

are often expected to juggle roles such as caregiver, breadwinner, and community leader without sufficient support (Ali & Hayes-Burrell, 2024). This framework underscores the imperative that institutional policies and practices evolve to recognize and interrupt the overlapping systems of oppression experienced by Black women in academia and the workplace (Showunmi, 2023). Furthermore, recent advancements in intersectional leadership theory emphasize that institutional practices must shift, not simply provide support, toward transformative structural change. This includes reimagining how mentoring, sponsorship, performance evaluation, promotion criteria, and organizational culture operate in ways that center multiple identities concurrently rather than treating them as independent variables (Sim & Bierema, 2024).

Intersectionality is essential for unpacking the complexities of Black women's experiences in professional and academic leadership, where the interplay of race, gender, and other identity factors create unique challenges that single-axis frameworks cannot fully capture. Crenshaw's work continues to inspire further research and policy discussions around how to create more inclusive and equitable environments for individuals with intersecting identities. It demands that institutional reforms move beyond siloed gender or racial solutions to integrative strategies that attend to the complex, interlocking layers of marginalization that Black women uniquely experience.

Summary and Conclusions

This chapter reviewed the existing body of literature concerning the perceived bias and barriers experienced by Black women in higher education leadership. The review traced the historical trajectory of Black women's educational and leadership

engagement, examined the persistent structural inequities shaping their professional lives, and outlined the theoretical frameworks that inform this study, particularly BFT.

The review emphasized the multidimensional barriers that constrain Black women's advancement in academia. These barriers include institutional racism and sexism, tokenism, impostor syndrome, microaggressions, and the compounded effects of the glass ceiling and glass cliff. Research consistently documents that Black women leaders are often treated as outsiders within predominantly white institutional cultures, resulting in isolation, exclusion from power networks, and heightened scrutiny of their performance. Despite these persistent challenges, the literature also highlights the resilience, fortitude, and ambition of Black women leaders. Recent scholarship illustrates that Black women are nearly three times more likely to aspire to prestigious senior leadership positions compared to their counterparts, underscoring their determination to advance despite systemic barriers (Chance, 2021). This ambition is coupled with a collective consciousness, where empowerment is derived not only from personal success but from mentoring and uplifting other Black women navigating similar complexities (Collins, 2022).

The literature reviewed in this chapter demonstrates that while Black women in higher education leadership roles face significant systemic barriers, they also embody resilience, ambition, and collective empowerment strategies that sustain their advancement. BFT and intersectionality provide critical lenses for interpreting these realities, highlighting how Black women must simultaneously resist racialized and gendered oppression while cultivating spaces of self-definition, resilience, and solidarity.

As a collective, Black women continue to emerge across the landscape of higher education leadership due in part to ambition. Black women are “nearly three times more likely to aspire to senior leadership with prestigious titles their counterparts” (Chance, 2021, p. 45). Black women are empowered when they can in all consciousness understand how to deal with life’s changes providing a freedom whereas she can share her journey with other Black women seeking to empower them based on the complexity of their problems (Collins, 2022).

Ultimately, this review underscores the urgency of further inquiry into the lived experiences of Black women leaders in higher education, particularly regarding the long-term effectiveness of coping strategies, mentorship, and sponsorship. By centering Black women’s voices and narratives, future research can illuminate both the barriers that persist and the strategies that enable transformation, thereby contributing to more inclusive and equitable leadership structures within academia.

Chapter 3: Research Method

Introduction

This chapter focuses on the purpose of the study, the research questions, the selected methodology, and the overall research design. The participants in this study were Black women serving in professional leadership roles at the dean or above level in higher education in the United States. Recruitment materials, including a flyer and email invitation, were distributed to potential participants, who voluntarily agreed to participate in a virtual, face-to-face interview to share their lived experiences. Data collected from these interviews were analyzed using qualitative software to identify key findings and emergent themes related to the research focus.

Research Design and Rationale

Qualitative research explores people's lives, behaviors, emotions, and perceptions (Patton, 2015). It utilizes interpretive practices to transform the world at large. This includes the use of field notes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings, and memos to the self (Billups, 2020). The overarching approach of qualitative research is to study how systems function as well as illustrate the consequences of the dynamics of the various phenomenon studies (Patton, 2015). Like overall research, multiple types of qualitative research allow a researcher to determine the specificity of inquiry and analysis according to what they want to select. General qualitative research was chosen for this study due to its ability to help provide the meaning of the topic being studied, helping to understand the perspectives and worldviews of Black women in professional roles in higher education. It was the best fit to understand the population's bias, barriers, and

beliefs as it was more closely aligned to gather the data to determine patterns and possible causes (Patton, 2015).

The goal of the research study was to take a holistic and comprehensive approach to study the experiences of Black women seeking advancement in higher education. General qualitative research allows the researcher to see this experience from the participants' perspectives, gaining insight into their rich encounters throughout their professional journey. Additionally, it provides flexibility to study the depth and detail of their experiences and perspectives without containment to predetermined categories of thought (Patton, 2015). Gathering high-quality data using skillful questioning sought to yield more significant input from the participants while generating comparative themes and helped to investigate the complexity inherent to this topic. This research helped inform new theories and conceptualize what is needed to better address the challenges presented.

Role of the Researcher

Qualitative research explores people's lives, behaviors, emotions, and perceptions utilizing interpretive practices to transform the world at large (Patton, 2015). Therewithin, the researcher is a part of the research just as the participant, helping to process the data provided. Additionally, the role of the researcher is to collect data through the interviewing process by gathering narratives, descriptions, and interpretations from the participants' responses (Patton, 2015). The process of interviewing in a semistructured format helps to draw new, open-ended information about the thoughts, feelings, and beliefs of the Black women interviewed. Notably, qualitative research is

utilized to explore the inner experiences and the formation and transformation of meanings of the participants' experiences and perceptions (Tisdell et al., 2025). These practices include the use of interviews, recordings, and notes to self (Billups, 2020; Saldaña, 2021).

With over 21 years of experience in interviewing and a Clinical Mental Health background where open-ended questioning is a part of my profession, this process is not unique but welcomed. I learned the process of silence in listening for responses, which provides the volunteers time to develop and share their thoughts fully. Although there may be a need to probe using sub-questions, it allows the participant a moment to reflect before moving ahead with a reply. I utilize excellent eye contact when asking questions and am able to read non-verbal and verbal undertones in responses. This helps me to redirect and reframe as needed. I am an engaged listener who encourages the speaker to flow in their conversation, providing head nods and cues that they are permitted and welcomed to share all. Lastly, I am aware of my biases. Although biases cannot be eliminated completely, controls were in place to counter or mitigate them. I can counter these by attempting to refrain from answering leading questions but reflecting on more question-neutral types. In addition, I kept a reflexive journal to help describe the experiences from my perspective, reaction to the responses, and reflections on the research process overall (Olmos-Vega et al., 2023). In a more extensive study, I used an independent reviewer to review the data and check coding to determine any themes of researcher bias (Creswell & Creswell, 2023).

Methodology

The methodology of this study is designed to provide a rigorous and ethical framework for exploring the lived experiences of Black women leaders in higher education at the dean level and above. This section outlines the logic and processes guiding participant selection, data collection, and analysis to ensure credibility, trustworthiness, and alignment with the research purpose. Given the historical and contemporary challenges of intersectionality faced by this population, careful attention is devoted to purposeful sampling, recruitment strategies, and ethical considerations to safeguard participants' voices. This chapter details the sample size determination, data saturation point, and use of semistructured interviews as the primary instrument of inquiry. Procedures for recruitment, participation, and data analysis are also discussed, alongside anticipated limitations, challenges, and barriers related to access. By establishing clear criteria and transparent processes, the methodology ensures that the study meaningfully captures the perspectives of Black women in leadership and contributes to filling the research gap.

Participant Selection Logic

Selecting participants for a qualitative study is a purposeful approach based on the topic. Purposeful sampling was used to recruit Black women in higher education leadership roles at the dean or above level. This population was chosen based on the research problem and the gap in research regarding this population. This population has historically been known to experience intersectionality of racism, sexism, and ageism; thus, adversity in numerous forms has plagued this population when attempting to garner

advancement in the profession (Chance, 2021). Chosen participants best informed the research question and understanding of the topic of the phenomenon being studied. Some of the best sources to find respective participants would be internet searches for universities.

Additionally, an open invitation via LinkedIn or populations from the Black Journal of Blacks in Higher Education would be options for diverse types of schools, such as Predominately White Universities (PWI), HBCU, and for-profit institutions. Interviews were conducted for 45-60minutes and recorded using Zoom Cloud recording. There were 10 significant questions with sub-questions for clarity where needed. Using inductive analysis, the researcher analyzed the interviews.

Ethical considerations involve the right to understand boundaries, informed consent, anonymity, privacy, and confidentiality of data treatment (Billups, 2020). Trust and confidentiality are important in the research process for anonymity (Patton, 2015). The relationship between the researcher and the participant was considered from establishment to evolution, ensuring ethical positioning, particularly as a Black woman in an administrative role (Billups, 2020). Ethical protection was provided for informants to reduce the strain on analyzing the data effectively and honestly.

Inclusion and exclusion help identify a targeted population that answered the research question. Inclusion criteria include demographic, clinical, and geographic characteristics. In contrast, exclusion criteria include characteristics of participants who are less likely to be available for follow-up, miss data collection appointments, provide incorrect data, have comorbidities that could bias the study, or increase the risk for

adverse effects (Aldadi et al., 2024). I defined the appropriate inclusion and exclusion criteria and how those decisions impact the validity of the result (Aldadi et al., 2024). Criteria for this study included Black women in professional leadership roles at the dean and above level.

Sample Size and Data Saturation

Patton (2015) purported that qualitative inquiry has a plethora of ambiguities, noting sample size depends on what the researcher wants to know, the purpose of the ambiguity, and what may be at stake. Additionally, it is critical to understand what would be useful, have credibility, and do it with the time and resources available (Patton, 2015). The sample size for this study included eight-10 participants. The sample size is dependent on information richness obtained from the participants. The information garnered from the research determined this number ensuring coverage of all areas of importance until a point of saturation was reached (Hennink et al., 2022).

Data saturation is the point where no new information or themes are evolving, meaning all categories are fully developed (Patton, 2015). It is where the researcher has found enough information to replicate the study and when no additional coding is feasible (Guest et al., 2020). To describe shared perceptions in this research, a semistructured interview process was created to address the research question and help develop themes from the responses. Triangulation of data was utilized to help ensure validity and to develop a truly comprehensive understanding of the data presented (Patton, 2015).

Instrumentation

Interview protocols help direct the activities of the interview and record the responses of the interviewee. Traditionally, it consists of four parts, including the header, major questions, sub-questions, and closing instructions (Creswell & Poth, 2024). For this protocol, an open-ended semistructured interview process was utilized to analyze and interpret the presented information. This format balances a core interview guide with flexible, probing follow-ups, supporting conversational depth while maintaining alignment to the research aims. Semistructured interviews are typically used with 6 to 20-person studies and represent a qualitative research study (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021). Using a set of prepared questions regarding the topic of study, the researcher questioned the respondents, allowing organic transfer of knowledge, usually encouraging the participant to tell a story (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021).

The interview was conducted using Zoom technologies in a virtual setting. The participant was asked ten questions using a conversational approach, encouraging a back-and-forth dialogue to cover the relevant issues and topics. It also allowed for flexibility in modifying questions as warranted by specific responses (Khan & MacEachen, 2022). The interview was scheduled for 60 minutes and recorded to the computer, with the interviewer taking detailed notes of the interview. The interview protocol captured accurate responses from the 8-10 respondents regarding their experiences.

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection (as Appropriate)

Given the limited number and broad geographic distribution of Black leaders in higher education, semistructured interviews were conducted using the Zoom platform.

This approach enhances accessibility, reach, and depth of participation across regions, allowing the researcher to connect with a diverse and representative sample beyond traditional geographic constraints. Zoom also provides a format that approximates natural face-to-face interaction while maintaining flexibility and convenience for participants with demanding schedules.

A responsive interviewing style was employed to foster rapport and trust between the interviewer and participants, resulting in a conversational and reciprocal exchange (Keen et al., 2022). This technique encourages participants to elaborate on their experiences and perspectives, generating richer, more nuanced data. Video conferencing tools such as Zoom are particularly effective for this approach, as they help mitigate logistical barriers and enable a supportive, nonconfrontational interview space (Khan & MacEachen, 2022).

Recruitment

Potential participants were identified through professional networks, higher education associations, and public institutional directories. Email invitations were distributed, including an overview of the study, the eligibility criteria (Black women currently serving in leadership roles at the dean level and above), and the informed consent document. Snowball sampling was also employed, whereby participants can recommend colleagues who meet the study criteria.

Participation

At the onset of each interview, the consent form was reviewed with participants. An introductory script outlined the purpose of the study, confidentiality protections, and

the voluntary nature of participation. Participants were reminded that they could withdraw at any time without penalty. Rapport was built by assuring participants of confidentiality, addressing any initial questions, and creating a safe environment for open discussion.

Data Collection

Interviews were semistructured, guided by open-ended questions developed from the research problem and conceptual framework. Questions focused on experiences of bias, barriers, strategies for overcoming challenges, and the support systems participants rely on. Follow-up probes were used to clarify responses and encourage deeper reflection. Each interview is expected to last 60-75 minutes. Periodic time checks were provided to ensure participant comfort.

All interviews were conducted and recorded via Zoom with participant permission. Audio recordings were professionally transcribed verbatim. Transcripts were reviewed against the recordings for accuracy. Field notes were also taken to capture nonverbal cues, tone, and researcher reflections immediately following each session. To protect confidentiality, pseudonyms were assigned, and all identifying information was removed during transcription. Data were stored securely on an encrypted, password-protected device and within an institutional cloud service approved for research storage.

Triangulation and Trustworthiness

To enhance credibility, transcripts were returned to participants for member checking, allowing them to verify accuracy and clarify meaning. An audit trail was maintained to document decisions made during recruitment, interviewing, transcription,

and data analysis. Peer debriefing with academic colleagues provided external checks on emerging codes and themes. Additionally, reflexive journaling was employed by the researcher to monitor personal assumptions and biases throughout the data collection process. These strategies together ensure that findings are dependable, confirmable, and transferable.

Finally, participants were thanked for their time and contributions. A brief debriefing concluded each session, providing an opportunity for participants to ask questions, reflect on their participation, or express concerns.

Data Analysis Plan

The study used interviews to examine a view of the insights and encounters of 8-10 Black women seeking possibilities or attaining the ability to advance beyond faculty positions. The participant was asked ten questions using a conversational approach, encouraging a back-and-forth dialogue to cover the relevant issues and topics. It allows flexibility in modifying questions as warranted by specific responses (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021). The interview was scheduled for 60 minutes and recorded to the computer, with the interviewer taking detailed notes of the interview.

Coding Method

Data were collected via interviews using Zoom Video Conferencing. Thematic analysis was utilized to provide generated themes from interview data. Initially, the researcher engaged in data immersion to determine emerging findings to help absorb and marinate on what was learned (Oliffe et al., 2021). This helps the researcher to capture reflections as well. Coding included descriptive coding to generate a list of subtopics

about what was shared (Saldaña, 2021). The researcher looked at coding domains, including goal-oriented, relationship-oriented, emotion-oriented, encounters, and effects of structures (Olliffe et al., 2021).

The researcher created a codebook that includes a short and long description, inclusion and exclusion criteria, typical and atypical exemplars. Additionally, themes were captured contextually from the interview reviews. The Microsoft office coding feature using macros was used to perform fundamental qualitative analysis (Isangula et al., 2024). Functions such as tables, table sorting, find and replace, and insert comments were captured for simple tasks.

Possible Types of Sources of Data

For the planned research design, Black women in higher education institutions who held a position of Dean or higher were recruited to participate in individual interviews. The interview protocol consisted of a semistructured interview development to address the problem and purpose of the study. The data included responses from the administrator interview questions regarding the perceptions of this population on bias, barriers, and privilege.

Limitations, Challenges, and/or Barriers

Research limitations are those parts of the methodology that influenced data interpretation. This includes constraints of the design, methods, data, or context that influence data collection and findings and therefore shape how results and conclusions should be interpreted; they should be stated explicitly along with their implications. The approach used for this study was open-ended data collecting using interviewing to help

gather high-quality information. Although a strong approach, they remain a limit to how much can be learned or gathered from what the respondent says (Patton, 2015). Likewise, limitations on resources, time, and complexities of the world can be identified when conducting a study. Subsequently, data limitations include distorted, biases, or planned responses as interviews can be distorted based on the emotional state of the interviewee at the time. In addition, recall, error, and self-serving purposes cannot be left out of the equation.

Access to Participants

Access to participants may be a limitation for this study. The study involves Black women in higher educational institutions who are leaders at the dean or above level. Although the numbers of Black women in leadership are rising, there remains a low number of persons in these roles. Additionally, it is noted that Black women in higher education have different experiences regarding a struggle for acceptance, equity, and respect (Collins, 2018). Due to the need to protect their roles, some women may not be willing to participate in the study. In addition, contact information may be incomplete or inaccurate, which could also lead to the inability to secure a large pool of participants. Delimitations may also include the decision to obtain data from respondents in specific areas or school types such as Predominantly White Institutions (PWI) or Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU).

Issues of Trustworthiness

In qualitative inquiry, trustworthiness refers to the rigor and validity of the study's findings, paralleling the notions of validity and reliability in quantitative research.

Lincoln and Guba's (1985) framework outlines four criteria of trustworthiness—credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability—which this study addressed in order to ensure the research on Black women in higher education leadership is conducted with integrity and rigor. Additionally, considerations of intra and intercoder reliability were incorporated, given that data analysis is primarily conducted by a single researcher with oversight from the dissertation committee. All strategies were implemented as plans for maintaining trustworthiness throughout the study's design, data collection, and analysis.

Credibility (Internal Validity)

Credibility refers to the truth-value or believability of findings – the extent to which the results authentically reflect participants lived experiences. Patton (2015) noted that credibility in qualitative research is analogous to internal validity in quantitative research, emphasizing accurate representation of what the study intends to investigate. To establish credibility, the researcher implemented multiple validation strategies recommended by qualitative methodologists. First, prolonged engagement and rapport-building with participants was pursued (within the practical limits of Zoom interviews) to foster trust and obtain richer, more candid data. Sufficient time was devoted in each semistructured interview to allow participants to fully share their perspectives, and data collection continued until saturation was reached (i.e., until no new themes emerge), ensuring that the findings are robust and comprehensive. Second, I utilized triangulation of data and perspectives where possible to corroborate findings. Although the primary data source is interviews, triangulation was achieved by comparing perspectives across

multiple participants and integrating any available contextual information, thereby cross-validating the emerging themes. Third, member checking was employed as a vital credibility technique: participants were invited to review their interview transcripts or summaries of preliminary findings to verify that these accurately capture their intended meanings. This process allows participants to confirm or clarify the researcher's interpretations, thus helping to correct any errors or misrepresentations. Billups (2020) specifically advocates member checks as a means to enhance credibility, whereby select participants review and confirm the findings to ensure the results resonate with their experiences. Throughout the analysis, the researcher also practiced reflexivity – engaging in continuous self-reflection to acknowledge personal biases and assumptions that could affect interpretation of the data.

By keeping a reflexive journal and bracketing biases, the researcher strived to prevent personal perspectives from unduly influencing the coding and theme development. Finally, peer debriefing was used as an external check on credibility. Engaging a peer/expert in this manner helps uncover potential biases or distortions in analysis and lends an independent perspective to confirm that the findings are grounded in the data. In sum, through strategies such as triangulation, member checks, reflexive journaling, saturation of data, and peer review, the study ensured a high level of credibility so that the findings faithfully reflect the voices of Black women higher education leaders.

Transferability (External Validity)

Transferability denotes the degree to which the study's findings can apply or transfer beyond the specific research context, analogous to external validity in quantitative studies. Because qualitative research does not seek broad generalization, the goal is instead to provide enough contextual detail that readers may determine whether results are applicable to other settings. This study enhanced transferability through thick description and purposeful sampling. Rich, detailed descriptions of the participants' backgrounds, institutional contexts, and experiences were documented in the dissertation. By describing the research setting and participants' narratives in depth – including relevant contextual factors of their leadership roles and campus environments – the researcher enables readers to evaluate the similarity of these contexts to their own situations. As Lincoln and Guba (1985) observed, providing sufficient detail through thick description allows others to judge how far conclusions may be transferable to “other times, settings, situations, and people”. In addition, a purposeful sampling strategy with variation in participant characteristics was used to bolster transferability. Participants (8–10 Black women in higher education leadership) were selected to represent diverse contexts – for example, different institution types, leadership positions, and career stages – to capture a range of experiences. Patton's maximum variation approach to purposeful sampling aims to include information-rich cases that reflect diverse dimensions of the phenomenon, thereby revealing common patterns that could be applicable across varied contexts. By intentionally varying the sample and then providing thick, rich descriptions of each participant's context and story, the study furnished readers with the information

needed to determine how the conclusions might fit in other universities or similar leadership settings. Thus, while the findings were specific to the participants studied, these techniques supported readers in assessing the transferability of insights about Black women's leadership experiences to other settings.

Dependability (Reliability)

Dependability refers to the stability and consistency of the research process and findings over time. A dependable study is one that another researcher could follow the decision trail and essentially repeat, expecting comparable results if conducted in the same context. To ensure dependability (paralleling the concept of reliability in quantitative research), the researcher maintained a transparent and systematic approach to data collection and analysis. One key strategy is creating an audit trail, which involves keeping a detailed record of all research activities and decisions. The audit trail included documentation such as raw data (interview recordings and transcripts), annotated analytical memos, code definitions and codebooks, and logs of methodological decisions or changes. By meticulously logging the steps taken – from how interview questions were developed, to how codes and themes were derived from the data – the researcher provides a “track record” that can be examined by others. This documentation allows an external reviewer (for instance, the dissertation chair or committee member) to audit the process and confirm that the study's findings logically stem from the data and procedures described. Indeed, external or peer auditing is a recommended technique for dependability: an independent examination of the study's methodology and findings can verify that the research process was consistent and that no analytic shortcuts or biases led

to distortions. In this study, the dissertation committee will effectively serve in a quasi-audit role by reviewing the methodological approach and emerging results, ensuring that the process is sound and repeatable. Furthermore, the researcher employed a codebook and consistent coding procedures during thematic analysis to standardize how data are interpreted. All codes were clearly defined, and example quotes were catalogued for each code, so that coding is applied uniformly across all transcripts. The coding process also involved iterative refinement – for example, using a code-recode strategy where the researcher codes a portion of data, takes a break, and then recodes the same data to check for consistency in code application.

Any discrepancies prompted clarification of code definitions or adjustments to the codebook, thereby improving reliability of the analysis. Throughout, reflexivity also contributed to dependability: the researcher continually reflected on and documented how her own positionality (as a scholar possibly sharing some identity/background with participants) might influence data interpretation and bracketed these reflections in the audit trail. By using an audit trail, peer review, and systematic coding practices, the study produced dependable results that others can trace and understand, reinforcing the consistency and repeatability of the research process.

Confirmability (Objectivity)

Confirmability pertains to the objectivity of the findings – ensuring that the results are shaped by the participants' data and not by researcher bias or subjectivity. In other words, confirmability asks whether an independent reviewer could confirm that the study's conclusions logically arise from the data. This study pursued confirmability

through reflexive practices, audit trails, and external review to minimize bias. A comprehensive audit trail (as described above) not only supported dependability but also allowed others to trace how the data were analyzed and how the interpretations were reached, thereby verifying that conclusions are grounded in actual participant responses. For example, the audit trail preserved evidence such as representative quotes for each theme, documentation of how codes were aggregated into themes, and notes on analytic decisions, which together enable an outside observer to follow the chain of evidence from raw interview data to final conclusions. Additionally, my ongoing reflexivity is crucial for confirmability. The researcher maintained a reflexive journal throughout the study to critically examine personal values, preconceptions, and emotional responses, acknowledging how these might sway data interpretation. By actively identifying potential biases (e.g., expectations as a Black woman academic, if applicable) and describing how analytic decisions were made in light of these reflections, the researcher adds transparency and demonstrates that efforts were made to let the participants' voices – rather than the researcher's opinions – drive the findings. Moreover, investigator triangulation in the form of peer review was utilized to bolster confirmability.

The dissertation chair periodically acted as a peer debriefer, objectively questioning and probing the researcher's interpretations and evidence. Discussing the analysis with a seasoned external observer in this way provides an external critique of potential biases and helps ensure that the themes and conclusions are not idiosyncratic to the researcher. Creswell and Poth emphasize that engaging a peer or expert to review the process can enhance the neutrality of the findings by exposing any researcher

predispositions that might have influenced the results. Finally, the study ensured that direct quotations and thick descriptions from participants are included when reporting results, so that readers can see for themselves the basis of each finding. By grounding each theme in illustrative data excerpts, the researcher allows the audience to confirm that interpretations have empirical support. Through these measures – reflexive journaling, audit trails, and peer debriefing by the chair – the confirmability of the study was strengthened, indicating that the conclusions about Black women’s leadership experiences logically flow from the participants’ own accounts and not from the researcher’s subjective biases.

Intra and Intercoder Reliability

Because the data analysis for this dissertation was conducted primarily by a single researcher, formal intercoder reliability (agreement between multiple independent coders) was not calculated. Instead, the focus was on ensuring intracoder reliability, or consistency of coding by the sole researcher over time, supplemented by peer consultation to approximate an intercoder check. To achieve this, I engaged in a code–recode procedure as part of the thematic analysis. This involves coding a subset of interview transcripts, setting them aside for a period, and then recoding the same transcripts later and comparing the results. Consistent coding upon reexamination indicated stability in how the researcher is interpreting and labeling the data; any significant discrepancies would signal the need to refine code definitions or develop clearer decision rules. Maintaining a well-defined codebook (with code names, definitions, and example quotes) facilitated this consistency by providing a reference for

the researcher each time coding is performed. In addition, the dissertation chair served as a peer examiner of the coding process to enhance reliability.

I regularly consulted with the chair to review the codebook, discuss code definitions, and examine coded text segments. Such peer review of coding is analogous to intercoder verification in that the chair can help identify biases, blind spots, or potential misinterpretations in the coding scheme. For instance, the chair may independently review portions of transcripts or the assignment of codes to certain excerpts to see if they align with the researcher's rationale. This collaborative review mirrors the benefits of intercoder reliability by bringing an external perspective to bear on the data analysis. As Creswell and Poth (2025) advised, having a peer debrief the analysis can expose subjective inclinations and thereby improve the accuracy and consistency of the findings. Any feedback from the chair was used to adjust the coding framework or resolve ambiguities, thus increasing the dependability of the coding outcomes. By implementing an intra-coder consistency check and involving the dissertation chair in ongoing peer debriefing of the analysis, the study addresses coder reliability concerns. These steps ensure that despite having a single analyst, the coding process remains systematic and credible, and that the resulting themes reliably reflect the data. In sum, the combination of code-recode techniques and dissertation chair oversight helped to produce trustworthy and reliable qualitative analysis in line with recommended best practices.

Ethical Procedures

This study adhered to the highest ethical standards in the treatment of human participants, in accordance with guidelines outlined by the Institutional Review Board

(IRB) and ethical protocols for qualitative research. All necessary institutional permissions and IRB approval were secured prior to recruitment or data collection. The IRB application included recruitment materials, informed consent forms, and interview protocols to ensure transparency and ethical compliance. Upon approval, the researcher received an IRB protocol number, which was documented in the final dissertation.

Institutional Permissions and Informed Consent

To gain access to participants, the researcher sought appropriate institutional permissions where required. Participants were recruited through publicly available professional directories, institutional websites, and professional networks such as LinkedIn or relevant academic publications (e.g., *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*). A recruitment flyer and invitation email were included in the IRB submission. Participants were informed that participation was entirely voluntary, and no institutional affiliation or supervisor was contacted.

Prior to participation, individuals were provided with an informed consent form detailing the purpose of the study, the procedures involved, potential risks and benefits, and their rights as participants. This form was shared electronically via email and reviewed at the beginning of the Zoom interview session. Participants were asked to provide electronic consent by replying via email with an affirmation statement or through a secure online form prior to the interview. The consent process was reiterated verbally before the interview begins, ensuring that participants understand their right to decline to answer any question, withdraw at any point, or discontinue participation without penalty.

Ethical Concerns Related to Recruitment and Data Collection

Because the study focuses on a population that may face systemic and institutionalized challenges, the recruitment process was handled with cultural humility and sensitivity. I ensured that no participant felt coerced to participate, particularly if recruitment occurs in professional or networked spaces where power dynamics might be implied. To mitigate this, no direct supervisors, subordinates, or known colleagues of the researcher were included in the participant pool.

All interviews were conducted in a private virtual setting using Zoom, and participants were encouraged to select a time and location that feels secure and comfortable for them. The researcher fostered a supportive, nonjudgmental interview environment to reduce any discomfort. Interviews were semistructured and conversational in tone, allowing participants to share only what they are comfortable discussing. Participants were reminded that their responses would be kept confidential, and any identifying information was removed or altered during transcription.

The potential for a perceived power imbalance was minimized by maintaining professional boundaries and emphasizing the voluntary nature of the study. As a fellow professional, the researcher remained reflexive throughout the data collection process, using journaling to monitor for any unintentional influence over participants' disclosures or interpretations of their narratives.

Data Confidentiality, Storage, and Dissemination

All data collected in this study were treated as strictly confidential. Interview recordings were stored on a password-protected external hard drive and in an encrypted,

cloud-based storage service accessible only to the researcher and, if needed, the dissertation chair for audit or oversight purposes. Interview transcripts were de-identified to remove names, institutions, job titles, or other identifiable information. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym to protect their identity.

Confidentiality was preserved throughout the data analysis and reporting process. Any data shared in the dissertation, presentations, or publications were presented using pseudonyms and generalized descriptions to further protect participant identities. Only the principal investigator and dissertation chair had access to raw data. All identifiable digital data were destroyed 3 years after the completion of the study, in compliance with institutional guidelines.

This study does not involve archival data or secondary sources. All data were collected firsthand from interviews with living participants. There were no incentives offered for participation, and the study was not conducted in the researcher's current work environment, thus minimizing conflicts of interest and potential ethical concerns related to dual roles or power differentials.

Additional Ethical Considerations

Given that I share demographic similarities with the study population (Black women in higher education), reflexivity was continuously practiced to monitor for bias and preserve the integrity of the participants' voices. A reflexive journal was maintained to document thoughts, reactions, and evolving interpretations throughout the research process. The dissertation chair also provided oversight, reviewing protocols, interview

procedures, and thematic interpretations to ensure that findings are grounded in participant narratives rather than researcher assumptions.

Ethical procedures were implemented at every phase of the study—from recruitment to data analysis—to safeguard participant rights, promote confidentiality, and preserve the rigor and trustworthiness of the research process.

Summary

Chapter 3 presents the methodological framework for this qualitative study, which explores the lived experiences of Black women serving in professional leadership roles at the dean or above level in higher education. It outlines the research design, rationale, and procedures, emphasizing the use of a general qualitative approach and semistructured interviews conducted via Zoom to gather rich, detailed narratives.

The chapter explains the participant selection process through purposeful sampling, ensuring diversity across institution types and leadership backgrounds. It also describes the role of the researcher and the strategies used to establish trustworthiness, including triangulation, reflexivity, member checking, and maintaining an audit trail. Ethical procedures are addressed in detail, including informed consent, participant confidentiality, and secure data handling. These measures ensure that the research upholds the principles of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

The next chapter, Chapter 4, presented the findings of the study, including thematic analysis of the participants' narratives. These findings were organized around the central research questions and supported by direct participant quotations to highlight

the complexity and richness of their lived experiences in navigating leadership roles within higher education.

Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

This chapter presents the results of a qualitative study examining the experiences and perceptions of bias and barriers among Black women in senior higher education leadership roles at the dean level and above. The purpose of this general qualitative study was to explore how Black women navigate systemic bias, institutional barriers, and intersecting forms of discrimination as they advance and persist in institutions of higher learning. The overarching research question guiding this study was: What are the experiences and perceptions of bias and barriers among Black women in professional leadership roles (dean and above) as they work to advance in institutions of higher learning?

This chapter is organized as follows: a description of the study setting, participant demographics, a summary of data collection and data analysis procedures, evidence of trustworthiness, and a presentation of the themes that emerged from thematic analysis. Participant quotations are used throughout to anchor the findings in the lived voices of the women who participated. The chapter concludes with a summary of key findings and a transition to Chapter 5.

Setting

This study was conducted virtually via the Zoom video conferencing platform, consistent with the methodology outlined in Chapter 3. The decision to conduct interviews virtually was intentional and strategic, enabling me to access a geographically diverse sample of Black women in senior leadership roles without restricting

participation to a specific region. Participants were located at institutions across the United States, representing both PWIs and HBCUs), spanning rural, urban, and online institutional contexts.

At the time of data collection, the higher education landscape continued to grapple with the residual effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, ongoing national discourse on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), and, in some states, active legislative efforts to restrict DEI initiatives. Several participants explicitly identified these broader contextual forces as having tangible effects on their professional environments, their authority as leaders, and their sense of institutional belonging. These conditions are acknowledged as contextual factors that may have shaped participants' recounting of their experiences and are considered in the interpretation of the findings.

One participant noted that her institution's geographic location within a state that enacted restrictions on DEI programming during the study period created direct constraints on her capacity to lead diversity-related initiatives. Another described the ongoing national reckoning over racial equity in higher education as simultaneously creating new burdens of visibility and new opportunities for coalition-building. These contextual realities are woven throughout the participant narratives presented below.

Demographics

A total of seven Black women participated in this study. Participants were recruited through purposive sampling supplemented by snowball sampling techniques, consistent with the procedures described in Chapter 3. All participants held leadership positions at the dean level or above at the time of data collection or had done so within

the immediately preceding 2 years, including roles such as Associate Dean, Vice President, Associate Vice President, Provost, and University President. Participants represented a range of institution types, including PWIs, HBCUs, and online institutions. Years in higher education leadership ranged from approximately 9 to more than 50 years, reflecting significant depth of institutional experience across the sample.

To protect confidentiality, all participants were assigned city-based pseudonyms. No identifying institutional information is disclosed in the presentation of findings. Table 1 provides a summary of participant demographics, including pseudonyms, role, institution type, years in leadership, and relevant contextual notes.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Pseudonym	Institution type	Years in leadership
Amsterdam	PWI (Online)	17
Delhi	PWI (Rural Community College)	22
Dubai	PWI (Public University)	13
Madrid	PWI (Online)	9–10
Milan	HBCU (current); prior PWI + corporate	17
Rome	HBCU (Land-Grant)	22+
Yokohama	HBCUs, PWIs, International	50+

Note. All participant names are pseudonyms assigned to protect confidentiality.

Institution type: PWI = Predominantly White Institution; HBCU = Historically Black College or University. Years in leadership reflect self-reported career tenure at the dean level or above.

Participant Profiles

To situate the thematic findings that follow, each participant is briefly introduced below. These profiles draw on interview transcripts and are intended to provide the thick, rich contextual description necessary to support transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Participants are presented in alphabetical order by pseudonym.

Amsterdam

Amsterdam served as a senior leader at an online PWI at the time of her interview. She had accumulated extensive experience in higher education and described her path to leadership as shaped by both intentional preparation and the necessity of navigating environments where she was consistently among the few, if not the only, Black woman at her level. Amsterdam's institution transitioned to a fully virtual service model during the COVID-19 pandemic, and she led the development of a virtual training initiative that became a model for peer institutions, an initiative she noted received considerably less institutional recognition than similar projects led by White male colleagues.

Amsterdam described a defining moment in her career in which she was formally labeled 'aggressive' by supervisors following a direct, evidence-based presentation to institutional leadership. This labeling, she explained, had lasting consequences for her advancement trajectory, and shaped the strategic calculus she applied to every subsequent professional interaction. Her response was to develop what she described as a 'village-building' strategy, cultivating deliberate relationships across functional areas to create informal networks of support and advocacy in the absence of formal sponsorship.

Delhi

Delhi held the position of senior academic leader at a rural community college, a PWI, at the time of her interview. With more than 22 years of experience in higher education leadership, Delhi had navigated the particular challenges of leading in a geographically isolated, predominantly White institutional environment in which she described herself as the only Black employee at the institution for a significant portion of her tenure. This singularity shaped every dimension of her professional experience, from the absence of peer community to the heightened scrutiny she faced in decision-making contexts.

Delhi's mentorship narrative diverged notably from those of other participants: she identified Caucasian male mentors as among the most substantive advocates for her professional development, while describing several relationships with Black women supervisors as sources of professional harm rather than support. She attributed this pattern in part to internalized competition and the scarcity dynamics created when only one or two seats at the leadership table were implicitly available to Black women. Delhi also described consistent self-promotion challenges, noting that advocating for her own accomplishments in performance evaluation contexts felt culturally counterintuitive and was frequently penalized by institutional evaluators who expected a different register of professional self-presentation.

Dubai

Dubai served as senior leader at a public university in the south. During her tenure, she was appointed as the first Black interim president in her institution's history, a

milestone she received with tempered pride, recognizing simultaneously that the appointment carried significant symbolic weight and that the structural authority attached to it was limited relative to the title. When a permanent search was convened and subsequently cancelled by the Higher Education Commission, Dubai experienced what she described as the clearest institutional confirmation that her advancement was bound by forces outside the meritocratic framework the institution publicly espoused.

Dubai's interview was conducted during a period of active state legislative effort to restrict DEI programming in state public universities. She described this environment as creating a layered burden: not only was she navigating long-standing institutional barriers associated with her race and gender, but she was now also tasked with protecting existing equity structures against politically motivated dismantling, while simultaneously leading a legal affairs division and absorbing the reputational and operational consequences of being visibly identified with DEI work. Dubai described her strategic posture as 'best supporting actor', performing her role with excellence while strategically managing the visibility of her advocacy to preserve her capacity to influence from within.

Madrid

Madrid had served as an Associate Dean at an online PWI but was on a self-described professional hiatus at the time of her interview. She had approximately nine to ten years of experience in higher education leadership and made the deliberate decision to step back from a position she described as untenable to her well-being and sense of professional integrity. Madrid's departure was not precipitated by a single discriminatory incident but by the accumulated weight of feeling consistently othered by her direct

reports and by the imminent transition to a new supervisor whose leadership style and institutional posture she assessed as incompatible with her own safety and effectiveness.

Madrid used the phrase “third-string team” to describe the experience of being elevated into a leadership role without being given the institutional resources, relational access, or decision-making authority commensurate with the title. She described this as a form of structural tokenism that was particularly difficult to name or contest because it did not manifest as overt exclusion, but as systemic under-resourcing dressed in the language of support. Her decision to exit the institution was, she explained, an act of self-preservation that she approached without apology, framing her departure as an exercise of the same strategic agency that had characterized her approach to leadership throughout her career.

Milan

Milan served as senior leader at an HBCU at the time of her interview, having transitioned to this role following a career that included leadership at PWIs and a period in corporate America. Her 17 years of experience in higher education were marked by a significant contrast between her experiences at her current HBCU and those she had navigated at prior PWI institutions. At HBCUs, Milan described experiencing a relief from the constant performance of accommodation and belonging that she had found exhausting at PWIs, a relief that allowed her to allocate cognitive and emotional resources to the substantive work of her role rather than to the management of others' comfort.

At a prior PWI, Milan described two incidents with particular precision: a search process she believed was manipulated to favor a less qualified White candidate, and an interaction in which a White female colleague's public display of emotional distress, directed at Milan during a professional meeting, was weaponized to reframe Milan as the source of workplace harm. These incidents, she argued, represented a pattern in which Black women's competence is delegitimized through procedural manipulation and emotional labor inversion. Milan also described documenting and ultimately contesting a pay inequity that was confirmed upon investigation, an experience she cited as evidence that structural discrimination in compensation was not incidental but systematic.

Rome

Rome served at an HBCU land-grant institution, with more than 22 years of experience in higher education. Her interview was among the most wide-ranging, encompassing both the most explicit institutional violence, a male colleague's hand-slam on a conference table directed at her during a professional meeting, and the most expansive account of leadership impact, including a successful legislative advocacy effort that moved her institution's land-grant funding allocation from 47 cents on the dollar to a two-to-one match.

Rome described her leadership philosophy as 'access-not-validation': she did not seek the approval of systems that had historically excluded her but instead focused on acquiring and deploying institutional access in service of concrete outcomes. She had built what she described as a network of Black women leaders at peer institutions, a solidarity infrastructure she used not only for personal sustenance but as a professional

resource for collective problem-solving and advocacy. Rome was also notable for her nuanced discussion of intra-community solidarity, describing her network of Black women peers as a genuine source of strength while acknowledging that individual relationships with Black women supervisors earlier in her career had been more complicated.

Yokohama

Yokohama brought the longest career arc of any participant, with more than 50 years spanning K–12 education, corporate, HBCUs, PWIs, and international higher education. At the time of her interview, she held a senior level position. Yokohama's narrative was among the most structurally expansive, encompassing a diversity strategy she developed and operationalized during her tenure in corporate America, a mentorship portfolio of 257 students she had formally advised, an address before Parliament on higher education, and a Memorandum of Understanding she had brokered between a university program and a university abroad.

Yokohama offered extensive reflection on what she described as a consistent pattern of resistance from African American male colleagues across multiple institutions, a form of intra-community gender dynamics she situated within both historical context and structural analysis, noting that her resistance to subordinating her authority to male peers had consistently created professional friction regardless of institutional setting. She also contributed two organizing frameworks that she used in her own leadership development work: the 'Five Ps' (Purpose, Passion, People, Process, and Perseverance) and the 'Three Cs' (Character, Competence, and Commitment). These frameworks, she

explained, had emerged from decades of observing what sustained Black women leaders through adversity and what distinguished those who thrived from those who exited the pipeline.

Data Collection

Data were collected through seven semistructured individual interviews conducted via Zoom. Each interview was scheduled for 60 to 75 minutes, although the actual interview durations ranged from approximately 58 to 85 minutes. All seven participants completed the interview in a single session. Participants were recruited over a 4-week period, and data collection was completed within an 8-week window. No participant withdrew from the study prior to or during the interview process.

Interviews were audio recorded with participant consent obtained electronically prior to each session. Recordings were professionally transcribed verbatim and reviewed by the researcher for accuracy by comparing transcripts against recordings. Field notes were taken immediately following each session to document nonverbal cues, the researcher's initial impressions, and emerging analytical reflections. No significant deviations from the data collection plan described in Chapter 3 were encountered.

A semistructured interview guide was used across all seven interviews. The guide consisted of approximately ten primary questions with associated follow-up probes, focused on: participants' career trajectories; their experiences as Black women in higher education leadership; the challenges and advantages associated with their racial and gender identity in leadership contexts; specific incidents in which bias or barriers became evident; navigation of hierarchical structures and promotion processes; and

recommendations for Black women aspiring to senior leadership. The same guide was used consistently across all participants to ensure comparability while allowing flexibility for follow-up probes responsive to each participant's unique narrative.

No significant deviations from the data collection plan described in Chapter 3 were encountered. The Zoom platform functioned reliably across all seven sessions. All participants demonstrated familiarity with the platform and engaged consistently throughout the duration of their respective interviews. Saturation of themes was assessed following the sixth and seventh interviews, with no substantively new codes or categories emerging in the final two sessions, providing evidence that the sample of seven participants was sufficient to support credible thematic analysis.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to analyze the interview data, consistent with the analysis plan described in Chapter 3. Following transcription and accuracy verification, the researcher engaged in an extended period of data immersion, reading and rereading all seven transcripts to develop a holistic understanding of the data prior to formal coding (Patton, 2015). Initial open coding was conducted using descriptive codes to capture what participants shared about their experiences of bias, barriers, and strategies for navigating their leadership environments (Saldaña, 2021). The initial open coding process generated a total of 47 discrete codes across the seven transcripts. These codes captured a range of phenomena including participants' experiences of intersectional misreading, structural exclusion from informal networks, sponsorship deficits, tokenism, representational labor,

intra-community dynamics, resilience strategies, and the cumulative psychological costs of navigating predominantly White institutional environments.

A codebook was developed that included code names, short and long definitions, inclusion and exclusion criteria, and exemplar quotations drawn directly from the transcripts to ensure coding consistency and replicability. The codebook underwent two rounds of revision following initial application: first, after the completion of open coding for the third transcript, to refine ambiguous definitional boundaries; and second, after the completion of open coding for all seven transcripts, to consolidate closely related codes and clarify distinctions between codes that had initially overlapped in application.

Following initial coding, I engaged in focused coding to group related codes into categories based on conceptual similarity. Categories were then examined for patterns across participants, and overarching themes were identified through iterative comparison and interpretive synthesis. The process moved inductively from coded units (discrete segments of participant language) to categories (conceptually related clusters of codes) to themes (overarching patterns that addressed the research question with depth and consistency across the data). Eleven categories emerged from this focused coding process, each representing a cluster of related codes that addressed a coherent dimension of participants' experiences. Categories were subsequently examined for patterns of recurrence across participants, strength of evidential support, and alignment with the study's theoretical framework of BFT (Collins, 1990, 2018). Through iterative comparison and interpretive synthesis, five overarching themes were identified that

collectively addressed the central research question with depth and consistency across the data.

A code-recode procedure was employed as an intracoder reliability check: after a two-week interval, a randomly selected subset of three transcripts, representing participants Amsterdam, Dubai, and Rome, was recoded independently by the researcher without reference to the original codebook entries. Codes assigned in the second pass were then compared systematically with those assigned in the first pass. Discrepancies were reviewed and resolved through careful re-examination of the codebook definitions and the relevant transcript segments, with any discrepancies prompting refinement of code definitions. No substantive changes to the five final themes resulted from this process, though three minor definitional clarifications were incorporated into the codebook. The dissertation chair reviewed the emerging coding framework and offered feedback that was integrated into the final analytical structure.

Discrepant cases, participant responses that did not align with emerging themes or that appeared to complicate predominant patterns, were documented and examined. In two instances, participants described relatively more positive experiences with institutional support systems, though they simultaneously acknowledged the broader structural barriers facing Black women in higher education leadership. One participant described a White male mentor as among the most influential advocates for her career, a pattern that diverged from the predominant narrative of cross-racial mentorship limitations. These discrepant perspectives were incorporated into the analysis to preserve

the integrity and complexity of the findings rather than subordinated to thematic coherence.

Five major themes emerged from the data, each supported by multiple participant accounts and illustrative quotations drawn directly from the transcripts. These themes are presented in the Results section.

Codebook

The codebook presented in Appendix A documents the 47 initial open codes that were generated during the first pass of thematic analysis, organized by the five overarching themes into which they were synthesized through focused coding. Each entry includes the code name, a short definitional label, a long definition specifying what the code captures and how it operates conceptually, inclusion criteria delineating the types of participant language to which the code applies, exclusion criteria specifying what the code does not capture, and an exemplar quotation drawn directly from the interview transcripts. City pseudonyms are used throughout in place of participant names.

The codebook is intended to support the transparency, dependability, and confirmability of the analytical process. It functions as both a methodological record and a guide that would enable an external reviewer to understand how interpretive decisions were made and how the final themes were grounded in the raw data.

Theme 1: Navigating the Invisible Barriers, The Concrete Ceiling in Action

This theme consolidates codes capturing participants' descriptions of structural and systemic barriers that constrained their access to senior leadership, shaped the conditions under which they led, and influenced their long-term career trajectories.

Barriers in this theme are distinguished from interpersonal bias by their institutional, procedural, and structural character.

Theme 2: The Weight of Dual Marginalization, Intersections of Race and Gender

This theme consolidates codes capturing participants' descriptions of experiencing discrimination as the simultaneous and compounding effect of both racial and gendered bias, consistent with an intersectional analytical framework, and the specific ways this dual marginalization shaped their professional lives.

Theme 3: Isolation and the Outsider-Within Experience

This theme consolidates codes capturing participants' descriptions of professional and social isolation, including singularity, exclusion from informal networks, sponsorship deficits, and the structural loneliness of being the only or one of very few Black women at the leadership level.

Theme 4: Tokenism, Hypervisibility, and the Burden of Representation

This theme consolidates codes capturing participants' descriptions of tokenistic appointment, the paradox of hypervisibility and invisibility, the expectation of representational labor, and racialized impostor syndrome, phenomena that together constitute the distinctive structural burden of being a Black woman in a visible leadership role.

Theme 5: Resilience, Resistance, and Strategic Survival

This theme consolidates codes capturing participants' descriptions of the active, intentional, and often exhausting strategies they employed to persist, advance, and lead effectively despite pervasive structural barriers. Resilience in this theme is understood not

as passive endurance but as a form of strategic agency and, in many cases, collective resistance.

Code Consolidation and Focused Coding Summary

The 47 initial open codes were generated from across all seven transcripts and subsequently subjected to focused coding to identify higher-order categories. The following table documents the eleven categories produced through focused coding and the open codes consolidated within each, along with the five overarching themes into which categories were ultimately synthesized.

The consolidation from 47 open codes to 11 categories to 5 themes was accomplished through iterative interpretive synthesis guided by three primary criteria: (a) evidential density, the number of participants who contributed coded material to the category; (b) conceptual coherence, the degree to which codes within a proposed category shared a unifying interpretive logic; and (c) theoretical alignment, consistency with the core constructs of Black Feminist Thought as the study's guiding framework. All five themes met a minimum threshold of evidence from at least five of the seven participants. The final analytical structure reflects these criteria and is documented in the study's audit trail for external review.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

Credibility

To establish credibility, I employed multiple strategies across data collection and analysis. Prolonged engagement was fostered through extended 60- to 85-minute interviews that provided participants ample time for deep reflection and comprehensive

narrative. Member checking was conducted by sharing interview summaries with five participants, who confirmed that the summaries accurately reflected their intended meanings, and one participant offered a minor clarification that was incorporated into the analysis. Triangulation was achieved by cross-referencing participant accounts across multiple interviews and comparing emerging themes with existing literature on Black women's leadership experiences in higher education. Reflexive journaling was maintained throughout the study to surface and examine the researcher's assumptions, emotional responses, and analytical decisions, supporting transparency and minimizing confirmatory bias.

Transferability

Transferability was supported through the use of purposive sampling with maximum variation, recruiting participants who represented diverse institution types (PWIs, HBCUs, online institutions), geographic regions (rural, urban, southern, national), and leadership roles (Associate Dean through University President). Thick, rich description is provided throughout this chapter, including detailed participant narratives, contextual information about each participant's institutional environment, and specific illustrative accounts, enabling readers to assess the degree to which findings may apply to similar contexts.

Dependability

Dependability was established through the maintenance of a comprehensive audit trail documenting all research activities, including recruitment records, interview notes, transcripts, codebook iterations across all versions, and analytical memos. A code-recode

procedure was used to verify intra-coder consistency over time, and the dissertation chair reviewed methodological decisions and the analytical process to ensure transparency and replicability of interpretive choices.

Confirmability

Confirmability was supported through reflexive journaling, ongoing peer debriefing with the dissertation chair, and the consistent use of direct participant quotations to ground interpretations in the data. My audit trail and analytical memos allowed for external review of how each theme was derived from the raw data, ensuring that conclusions reflected participants' voices and experiences rather than my preconceptions. The researcher's identity as a Black woman in higher education leadership was treated as an asset for rapport and interpretive insight while also being actively bracketed through journaling and supervisory feedback to prevent over-identification.

Results

Thematic analysis of the interview data yielded five overarching themes addressing the central research question regarding the experiences and perceptions of bias and barriers among Black women in senior higher education leadership. These themes are: (a) Navigating the Invisible Barriers: The Concrete Ceiling in Action; (b) The Weight of Dual Marginalization: Intersections of Race and Gender; (c) Isolation and the Outsider-Within Experience; (d) Tokenism, Hypervisibility, and the Burden of Representation; and (e) Resilience, Resistance, and Strategic Survival. Each theme is

presented below with multiple supporting participant quotations and contextual interpretation.

Theme 1: Navigating the Invisible Barriers: The Concrete Ceiling in Action

All seven participants described experiences with systemic barriers that limited their access to senior leadership opportunities, shaped the conditions under which they led, and influenced their long-term career trajectories. Participants consistently distinguished between barriers they could see and acknowledge, discriminatory hiring practices, exclusion from key committees, opaque promotion criteria, and those that were more insidious and difficult to name or contest. Several used the metaphor of the concrete ceiling to describe barriers that, unlike the glass ceiling, could not be broken through sheer determination or credential accumulation.

Dubai provided one of the clearest illustrations of this structural reality when she described the cancellation of an executive search following her appointment as interim president. She stated:

I had demonstrated everything they said they were looking for. I had the credentials, the relationships, the track record. And then the search was cancelled. There is no policy you can point to. But when you sit with it long enough, you understand exactly what happened. The ceiling is not made of glass. It is made of something you cannot see through and cannot break.

Madrid described a similarly concrete encounter with structural limitation in her discussion of what she called being placed on the 'third-string team', elevated into a leadership role that carried the title without the corresponding resources, authority, or

institutional infrastructure. She explained, “I was given the responsibility without the power. That is a very specific kind of limitation that looks like opportunity from the outside but functions as containment from within.”

Rome documented institutional bias through a physical incident that crystallized the relational dynamics of her leadership environment. She described a senior male colleague who, during a formal meeting, slammed his hand on the conference table and raised his voice at her in response to a decision she had made within her purview as president. “That would not have happened to a White male president,” she stated. “That would not have happened to a male president of any race. That happened to me because of who I am and because of what they believed they could do in my presence.”

Yokohama offered a career-spanning perspective, describing encounters with structural exclusion at multiple institutions over more than 5 decades. She noted the consistency of the pattern, “The barriers shift their shape. They become more sophisticated. But they are always there. And you develop a kind of institutional literacy that lets you see them coming, even when other people in the room cannot or will not name them.” She described her early work at NASA developing a diversity plan as an exercise in translating structural analysis into actionable policy, an effort she undertook, she explained, precisely because she understood from personal experience the gap between an institution's stated commitment to equity and its actual distribution of opportunity.

Participants' accounts are consistent with existing scholarship documenting the concrete ceiling as a distinctly intersectional barrier that compounds race and gender

discrimination in leadership contexts (Chance, 2021; Davis & Maldonado, 2015). The narratives presented here extend prior research by providing granular institutional detail that illuminates how these barriers operate at the level of daily leadership practice rather than exclusively in formal hiring or promotion processes.

Theme 2: The Weight of Dual Marginalization: Intersections of Race and Gender

Participants consistently described experiencing discrimination not as a product of race or gender in isolation, but as the simultaneous and compounding effect of both. This dual marginalization shaped how they were perceived, evaluated, and treated by colleagues, supervisors, and subordinates. The concept of intersectionality, the recognition that systems of oppression operate simultaneously and are not reducible to their component parts (Crenshaw, 2019), was frequently invoked, either explicitly or implicitly, in participants' accounts.

Amsterdam's account of being labeled 'aggressive' provided perhaps the most direct illustration of intersectional misreading. She described the incident with precision:

I presented data. I made an argument. I was direct and I was prepared. And the feedback I received was that I had been aggressive. I knew immediately that word doesn't come from the content of what I said. That word comes from a very specific image that people have of Black women, and it was being applied to me regardless of what I actually did in that room.

Amsterdam went on to describe how the label persisted in informal networks at her institution, shaping how colleagues oriented to her in subsequent meetings and effectively constraining the register of communication available to her. "I learned to

soften everything. Not because I believed I needed to, but because the cost of not softening was too high. And that is a tax that my White male colleagues do not pay”

Milan described the mechanics of intersectional devaluation in performance contexts, explaining how her direct communication style was consistently evaluated differently from that of White male peers who employed similar registers. “There is a double standard that is not written anywhere. But it is enforced every day. I have watched colleagues behave in ways that would have ended my career, and they were called strong leaders. I was called difficult.”

Rome offered a more philosophical account of the same phenomenon.

I am never just a woman in the room, and I am never just a Black person in the room. I am always both simultaneously. And the people in the room respond to that whether they recognize it or not. My leadership is always being evaluated through both lenses at once, and the composite image that produces is not the same image that my peers see when they look at themselves.

These findings reinforce existing scholarship demonstrating that Black women experience forms of intersectional discrimination not adequately captured by frameworks centered on either race or gender alone (Collins, 2018; Dickens et al., 2019; Jean-Marie et al., 2009). The data further suggest that institutions that address diversity through single-axis frameworks, focusing exclusively on racial equity or gender equity without attending to their compounding effects, fail to adequately account for or address the distinct experiences of Black women leaders.

Theme 3: Isolation and the Outsider-Within Experience

Six of seven participants described profound experiences of professional and social isolation at their institutions. This isolation was multifaceted; it manifested as exclusion from informal networks and decision-making conversations, as the absence of peers who shared their racial and gendered identity, and as a pervasive sense of being tolerated rather than genuinely valued or included. Participants' accounts resonated with Collins's (2000) concept of the outsider-within, the experience of being physically present within an institution while remaining relationally and culturally marginalized from the informal structures of power that shape professional outcomes.

Delhi captured the texture of this isolation with particular clarity, describing what it meant to be the only Black employee at her institution, “There is no one to check in with. There is no one who has had the same experience in that building. When something happens, and things happened regularly, I processed it alone. And then I went back to work. Because that is what you do.”

Yokohama described isolation as a structural feature of her career across multiple institutions and decades, noting that singularity had come to feel normal even as its costs accumulated.

I have spent most of my career being the only one or one of very few. You adapt. You develop strategies. But the adaptation is not free. There is a cost to performing belonging in spaces that have not been designed to include you, and that cost is paid over a very long time.

Several participants also described the critical role that mentorship and sponsorship played, or failed to play, in their professional trajectories. A distinction consistently emerged between mentorship (the provision of guidance, advice, and encouragement) and sponsorship (the active advocacy of influential stakeholders on behalf of an emerging leader in spaces where that leader is not present). Amsterdam articulated this distinction directly, “Mentors give you advice. Sponsors open doors. I had several people who were willing to give me advice. Finding someone willing to go into a room I was not in and say my name, that was much harder.”

Madrid described her isolation as intensifying in her final months at her institution, as she recognized that neither the incoming supervisor nor her direct reports were invested in creating the conditions she needed to lead effectively. “I was in the building. I had the title. But I was functioning outside the relational infrastructure of the institution. That is a very particular kind of alone.” Her decision to exit, she explained, was in part a recognition that continued presence without genuine inclusion was exacting a cost she was unwilling to continue paying.

These findings align with research documenting the critical role of mentorship and sponsorship in the advancement of Black women in higher education, and the barriers this population faces in accessing both (Bush, 2025; Chance, 2021; Robinson, 2023). The isolation documented here also contributed to the experiences of racialized impostor syndrome described within the context of Theme 4.

Theme 4: Tokenism, Hypervisibility, and the Burden of Representation

Six of seven participants described experiences of tokenism, the appointment to or retention in leadership roles in ways that prioritized symbolic diversity over substantive inclusion, authority, and institutional belonging. Participants described navigating a paradox of simultaneous hypervisibility and invisibility: they were highly visible as Black women in senior roles, particularly in predominantly White institutional environments, while their substantive contributions, professional judgments, and leadership capacities were frequently rendered invisible or illegitimate.

Dubai offered a precise account of this paradox in reflecting on her appointment as interim president.

I was brought in to be visible. I understood that. I was willing to be that. But the visibility was not accompanied by the full institutional authority the title implied.

I was visible in ways that served the institution's image, and invisible in ways that would have required the institution to share power.

Milan described the expectation of representational labor, the informal institutional expectation that Black women in leadership serve as cultural experts, diversity ambassadors, and interpreters of Black experience for predominantly White colleagues and institutional stakeholders, as one of the most structurally invisible and practically consuming dimensions of her professional experience.

Every time there was a conversation about race or equity, I was expected to speak for all Black people everywhere. That is an enormous burden. And if I declined,

or if I gave a nuanced answer that did not confirm what they wanted to hear, I was seen as not fulfilling a role I had not agreed to take on.

Amsterdam connected her experience of hypervisibility to the persistent self-monitoring it required.

When you are the only one, every decision you make is read as representative. If I am direct, that is aggressive. If I am warm, that is unprofessional. If I advocate for resources, that is self-serving. There is no neutral position. Every move is watched and interpreted through a lens I did not design.

Participants also described experiencing racialized impostor syndrome, sustained patterns of self-doubt fueled not only by internalized perfectionism but by repeated external signals that questioned their legitimacy and authority. Yokohama described this as a dynamic she had observed across generations of Black women leaders.

The doubt that people experience is not a personality defect. It is a rational response to environments that consistently communicate that you do not belong. You internalize the message that has been sent to you ten thousand times. The work is to resist it without denying that it was sent.

These findings align with prior scholarship on the invisibility/hypervisibility paradox experienced by Black women in predominantly White institutional settings (Iheduru-Anderson et al., 2024) and with research on racialized impostor syndrome as a structural rather than exclusively psychological phenomenon (Cokley et al., 2024; Doggett, 2019). Participants' accounts extend this literature by illustrating the practical

mechanisms through which institutional tokenism generates and sustains both hypervisibility and representational burden in the lived experience of leadership.

Theme 5: Resilience, Resistance, and Strategic Survival

Despite the pervasive and multifaceted barriers documented above, all seven participants identified strategies they employed to persist, advance, and lead effectively. Resilience emerged as a defining characteristic of participants' professional identities, not as passive endurance of adversity, but as active, strategic, and often exhausting engagement with the structural conditions of their leadership environments. Participants described building coalitions, cultivating allies across racial and institutional lines, leveraging professional networks, engaging in self-advocacy, drawing on spiritual and community resources, and mentoring others as forms of both survival and resistance.

Yokohama offered the most systematized account of strategic resilience, having translated her decades of experience into two explicit frameworks she used in her leadership development work. The 'Five Ps', Purpose, Passion, People, Process, and Perseverance, she described as the foundational elements she observed in Black women leaders who sustained their effectiveness over time. The 'Three Cs', Character, Competence, and Commitment, she framed as the qualities that distinguished those who were able to build durable institutional authority from those who found their leadership continuously contested or undermined. “These are not natural gifts,” she explained. “They are developed deliberately, over time, in response to environments that require them of us specifically in ways they do not require of others.”

Rome described her resilience as grounded in a clarity of mission that she treated as non-negotiable, “One of the reasons I stay is because I know that if I leave, there may not be another Black woman in this seat for years. I carry that. I take it seriously. And on the hardest days, it sustains me when nothing else does.” She described the network of Black women presidents she had cultivated at peer institutions as both a personal resource and a strategic infrastructure, a source of solidarity, shared intelligence, and collective problem-solving that she returned to regularly when navigating challenges, she could not address through formal institutional channels.

Amsterdam described her village-building strategy as a deliberate construction of informal support networks that compensated for the absence of formal sponsorship. “I identified people across the institution who understood what I was doing and why it mattered. I invested in those relationships. And I called on them, strategically, when I needed access to information or advocacy that I could not generate on my own.” She framed this not as manipulation but as a form of organizational intelligence that should have been unnecessary but was, in practice, essential.

Dubai described strategic visibility management, what she called “best supporting actor” positioning, as a survival skill developed in response to the political environment at her institution, “I learned to lead from a position that was slightly below the line of institutional visibility for certain kinds of advocacy. Not because I was ashamed of the work, but because being too visible made me a target in ways that ultimately reduced my capacity to do the work.” She acknowledged the ethical complexity of this posture while insisting on its practical necessity.

Madrid described her decision to exit her institution as itself an act of strategic resilience, a recognition that not all environments are worth transforming and that professional survival sometimes requires the courage to leave rather than the endurance to stay. “Resilience is not always staying,” she said. “Sometimes resilience is knowing what you deserve and refusing to accept less. I chose to leave. That was the most strategic thing I could have done.”

These findings resonate with the broader literature documenting resilience as a central feature of Black women's leadership narratives in higher education (Chance, 2021; Collins, 2022; Erskine et al., 2021). Critically, participants' accounts underscore that resilience is not a substitute for systemic change, it is a survival strategy employed in the absence of adequate institutional support. As Rome stated directly: 'My resilience is not evidence that the system is working. It is evidence that I have refused to let the system win.

Summary

Chapter 4 presented the results of this qualitative study examining the experiences and perceptions of bias and barriers among seven Black women in senior higher education leadership positions. Data collected through structured individual interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis, yielding five major themes: (a) Navigating the Invisible Barriers: The Concrete Ceiling in Action; (b) The Weight of Dual Marginalization: Intersections of Race and Gender; (c) Isolation and the Outsider-Within Experience; (d) Tokenism, Hypervisibility, and the Burden of Representation; and (e) Resilience, Resistance, and Strategic Survival.

Taken together, these findings document the pervasive and multifaceted nature of the structural barriers Black women encounter in higher education leadership while also centering the remarkable agency, strategic intelligence, and resilience these leaders bring to navigating those barriers. The overarching research question, What are the experiences and perceptions of bias and barriers among Black women in professional leadership roles at the dean level and above, is answered with specificity and depth across all five themes, with participant quotations anchoring each finding in lived experience.

Discrepant cases, including accounts of cross-racial mentorship effectiveness and the complexity of intra-community solidarity, were documented and incorporated to preserve the full texture of the data. Chapter 5 presents an interpretation of these findings in relation to the existing literature and the study's theoretical framework, along with limitations, recommendations, implications for positive social impact, and a conclusion.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Introduction

This study was conducted to explore the experiences and perceptions of bias and barriers among Black women in professional leadership roles at the dean level and above in institutions of higher learning in the United States. Despite incremental increases in the representation of Black women in higher education leadership pipelines, this population remains significantly underrepresented in senior positions and continues to encounter systemic barriers rooted in the intersecting forces of racism, sexism, and institutional exclusion (Chance, 2021; Davis & Maldonado, 2015; National Center for Education Statistics, 2024). Using BFT as the guiding theoretical framework, this qualitative study employed semistructured interviews with seven Black women senior leaders to center their narratives and examine the lived realities shaping their professional journeys.

Five themes emerged from thematic analysis of the data: (a) Navigating the Invisible Barriers: The Concrete Ceiling in Action; (b) The Weight of Dual Marginalization: Intersections of Race and Gender; (c) Isolation and the Outsider-Within Experience; (d) Tokenism, Hypervisibility, and the Burden of Representation; and (e) Resilience, Resistance, and Strategic Survival. This chapter discusses these findings in the context of the existing literature, offers interpretation of the results through the lens of BFT, addresses the study's limitations, and presents recommendations for further research, practice, and policy. The chapter concludes with implications for positive social impact and a synthesis of the study's significance.

Interpretation of the Findings

The findings of this study both confirm and extend existing scholarship on Black women's experiences in higher education leadership. The five themes that emerged align with patterns documented in prior research while also offering nuanced, first-person accounts that deepen the scholarly understanding of how Black women leaders experience, interpret, and navigate leadership within higher education contexts.

Theme 1: The Concrete Ceiling

Theme 1, which documents the concrete ceiling as a lived institutional reality, reinforces the findings of Chance (2021), Davis and Maldonado (2015), and Adamovic and Leibbrandt (2024), all of whom document the persistence of structural barriers that prevent Black women from ascending to and thriving in senior leadership roles regardless of their qualifications or professional achievements. Participants in this study described opaque promotion criteria, the cancellation of executive searches, exclusion from informal networks, and double standards in performance evaluation. These accounts extend prior research by illuminating how the concrete ceiling operates not only through formal institutional policies but also through the everyday practices and decision-making processes that shape leadership advancement.

The experience of Dubai illustrates this dynamic with particular clarity. After serving as the institution's first Black interim president and positioning herself as a strong candidate for the permanent role, she described what followed: "Instead of going through the interview process, they canceled the search... I probably would have been the person... they just canceled the search" (Dubai). This account encapsulates how

structural exclusion operates not through overt rejection but through procedural manipulation that forecloses Black women's advancement while maintaining institutional plausibility.

Theme 2: Intersectional Discrimination

Theme 2, which addresses intersectional discrimination, aligns closely with Crenshaw's (2019) intersectionality framework and Collins's (2018) BFT both of which emphasize the compounding effects of race and gender in shaping Black women's experiences of institutional power. Participants described with notable clarity how their leadership styles and professional decisions were evaluated through a simultaneously racialized and gendered lens, consistent with findings by Dickens et al. (2019) and Jean-Marie et al. (2009). The present study extends this literature by illustrating how intersectional bias operates not only in formal institutional processes but also in the everyday relational dynamics of academic leadership, including informal labeling, differential expectations for communication, and the invisible labor of constant self-monitoring.

Amsterdam's experience of being labeled "aggressive" captures this intersectional dynamic precisely. After conducting what she described as a routine accountability meeting, she recounted: "I got a call to meet afterwards, and it was, 'oh, you was aggressive in that meeting.' No one who has ever described me or interacted with me has ever called me aggressive. But I was holding my team accountable" (Amsterdam). This labeling reflects how the same assertive behavior that reads as effective leadership in a white male colleague is filtered through racialized and gendered assumptions when

enacted by a Black woman, producing a distorted evaluative judgment that has lasting career consequences.

Theme 3: Professional and Social Isolation

Theme 3, which documents professional and social isolation, resonates with Chance's (2021) phenomenological findings of profound loneliness and alienation among Black women leaders in academic environments, as well as Collins's (2000) concept of the *outsider-within*. The present study extends these findings by foregrounding the sponsorship gap, the distinction between mentorship and active advocacy, as a critical mechanism through which isolation translates into constrained career advancement. Additionally, the findings connect this isolation to the experience of racialized impostor syndrome described in Theme 4.

Madrid captured the texture of this isolation with economy and precision: "It was very isolating. Because I was at a PWI. And at a PWI, African-American women were scarce in administrative roles. And so being able to form a relationship first required some level of safety with those persons" (Madrid). This account underscores that professional isolation for Black women is not merely an absence of social contact but a condition of structural scarcity that demands sustained vigilance and intentional effort simply to form the collegial relationships that their white counterparts access organically.

Theme 4: Tokenism and Hypervisibility

Theme 4, which addresses tokenism and hypervisibility, is consistent with Kanter's (1977) foundational theory of tokenism and more recent work by Iheduru-Anderson et al. (2024), which documents the invisibility–hypervisibility paradox

experienced by Black women in predominantly White institutional settings. The present study extends this literature by examining how the burden of representational labor—specifically, the expectation that Black women serve as cultural experts and diversity ambassadors—functions as a structural tax on leadership capacity. Additionally, the study situates impostor syndrome within the broader institutional dynamics of tokenism rather than framing it solely as an individual psychological experience.

Delhi articulated the weight of representational labor with striking directness: “I’m literally the only African-American employee, not just woman, but employee here at this college... you end up representing your entire race. Especially in an area where it’s not really diverse. Some of these individuals have probably never even interacted with a Black woman before” (Delhi). This account illustrates how hypervisibility operates not as recognition but as burden—a relentless, total form of exposure in which a single individual becomes the sole point of reference for an entire racial and gender identity.

Theme 5: Resilience as Strategic Resistance

Theme 5, which highlights resilience as a form of active resistance and strategic survival, is consistent with the work of Chance (2021), Collins (2022), and Erskine et al. (2021), all of whom identify resilience as a central feature of Black women’s leadership narratives. However, the current study extends this literature by emphasizing the strategic sophistication and intentionality embedded within participants’ resilience practices. These strategies included explicit frameworks such as Yokohama’s Five Ps and Three Cs, coalition-building approaches, and Madrid’s reframing of exit as a strategic act. Importantly, the findings suggest that resilience should not be interpreted as evidence of

institutional adequacy but rather as a survival strategy developed in response to the absence of meaningful systemic support.

Yokohama's reflection on navigating bias across a career spanning more than 50 years crystallizes the intentional, prepared quality of this resilience: "Bias is everywhere... I wake up every day understanding that it exists and appreciating that I need to have a strategy, a creative strategy, to be able to address it wherever it shows up so that I am not disarmed" (Yokohama). This orientation—anticipatory, disciplined, and self-aware—represents not passive endurance but active and ongoing strategic resistance, precisely the form of resilience that Black Feminist Thought identifies as central to Black women's survival and transformation of oppressive systems.

Findings Through the Lens of Black Feminist Thought

Interpreted through the theoretical lens of BFT (Collins, 1990, 2018), the findings illuminate how Black women's leadership experiences in higher education are shaped by interlocking systems of oppression, racism, sexism, and institutional exclusion, that operate simultaneously and reinforce one another within academic structures. BFT's core epistemological tenet, that Black women's knowledge and lived experiences constitute a distinct and valuable standpoint, is affirmed by the richness and specificity of the narratives offered by participants in this study.

BFT's concept of the outsider-within (Collins, 2000) is particularly salient in interpreting the study's findings. Participants described occupying senior leadership roles while being relationally and culturally marginalized from the informal workings of institutional power. This duality, formal authority coexisting with informal exclusion,

captures the paradox at the heart of many participants' professional experiences and reflects the structural reality that formal representation does not, in itself, constitute genuine inclusion, equity, or shared institutional power.

BFT also illuminates the theme of resilience as a form of collective resistance. Collins (2022) emphasized that BFT is not only a framework for understanding the structures of oppression but a framework for understanding the ways in which Black women resist, survive, and transform systems that seek to diminish them. Participants in this study embodied this principle through their strategic navigation of institutional barriers, mentorship of subsequent generations, deliberate cultivation of solidarity networks, and willingness to name what other institutional actors refused to acknowledge. These actions functioned not merely as individual coping strategies, but as collective and generative forms of resistance grounded in a shared consciousness of positionality and purpose. This finding underscores the importance of centering Black women's voices and perspectives not only as subjects of scholarly inquiry but as agents of institutional transformation.

Limitations of the Study

Several limitations arose in the execution of this study that should be considered in interpreting the findings. First, the sample was limited to seven participants recruited through purposive and snowball sampling. While this sample size is appropriate for a general qualitative design and data saturation was reached within the parameters of the study, the findings cannot and should not be generalized to the full population of Black women in higher education leadership. The experiences documented here represent a

specific, context-bound sample and should be understood as one window into a broader and more diverse set of realities, consistent with the transferability framework of qualitative inquiry rather than the generalizability criteria of quantitative research.

The study relied exclusively on self-report data obtained through individual interviews. While semistructured interviews are an appropriate and rigorous method for exploring lived experiences, participant responses may be subject to recall bias, social desirability effects, or the influence of the participant's emotional state at the time of the interview. The researcher took deliberate steps to minimize these limitations through rapport-building, reflexive practice, and member checking, but these potential sources of bias cannot be fully eliminated.

My identity as a Black woman in a higher education leadership role created both assets and potential liabilities. This positionality enhanced my capacity to build rapport, understand contextual nuances, and recognize interpretive significance in participant accounts that a researcher with a different identity might have missed. It also introduced the risk of over-identification or confirmatory bias. Bracketing strategies, reflexive journaling, and dissertation chair oversight were employed systematically to mitigate this risk and are documented in the study's audit trail.

Data collection was conducted via Zoom, which, while providing significant advantages in terms of access and geographic breadth, precluded observation of participants' full physical environments and may have introduced technical barriers to complete and natural expression for some participants. These limitations do not undermine the rigor or integrity of the findings; rather they underscore the value of future

research that replicates and extends this work through additional methodological approaches.

Recommendations

Recommendations for Future Research

The findings of this study point to several productive directions for future scholarship. Future research should seek to replicate and extend this study using larger and more geographically diverse samples to enhance the transferability of findings and support cross-contextual comparison. Comparative studies examining differences in experience across institution types, PWIs, HBCUs, community colleges, and for-profit institutions, would provide a richer and more nuanced understanding of how institutional context shapes the barriers and support structures available to Black women leaders.

Longitudinal research designs would enable scholars to track the career trajectories of Black women leaders over time, capturing the cumulative effects of systemic bias and institutional barriers on retention, advancement, and well-being, and permitting assessment of the sustained effectiveness of institutional interventions such as mentoring programs and equity audits. Research focused specifically on the career-stage transition from mid-level leadership to the dean level and above would also be particularly valuable for informing targeted pipeline interventions.

Quantitative and mixed-methods studies examining the institutional and structural predictors of Black women's representation in senior leadership, including characteristics of institutions where Black women are more or less likely to advance and persist, would complement the depth of understanding produced by this and similar qualitative studies.

Finally, future research should more explicitly examine the intersectional experiences of Black women who hold multiple marginalized identities, including those who are LGBTQ+, disabled, or from specific socioeconomic backgrounds. These intersecting identities may intensify the structural barriers identified in the current study in ways that remain insufficiently theorized and empirically explored.

Recommendations for Practice

The findings of this study have direct implications for higher education administrators, human resources professionals, and institutional leaders committed to advancing equity in academic leadership. Institutions should implement transparent, equity-centered promotion and evaluation processes that include explicit and publicly available criteria, regular audits for racial and gender bias, and diverse review committees. Participants in this study consistently identified opacity in promotion processes as a primary vehicle for enabling discriminatory outcomes. Accordingly, greater transparency and institutional accountability are necessary to dismantle these structural barriers.

Institutions should invest in formalized sponsorship programs that connect Black women in leadership with senior institutional advocates who are positioned and willing to actively champion their advancement in spaces where they are not present. Although mentorship is valuable, it is insufficient without sponsorship. The findings of this study suggest that the gap between guidance and active advocacy constitutes a critical structural barrier influencing the advancement of Black women leaders. Institutions should conduct regular climate assessments specifically designed to surface the experiences of Black

women in leadership roles, including experiences of isolation, tokenism, and intersectional bias. The results of such assessments should be shared transparently with the campus community and should directly inform institutional policy revision.

Professional development programming specifically designed for Black women in and aspiring to senior leadership should be established at the institutional, consortium, and national association levels, programs that provide not only skill development but peer community, mentorship access, and connection to professional networks from which these leaders are too often informally excluded.

Finally, institutions must address the burden of representational labor placed on Black women leaders by ensuring that institutional transformation efforts are fairly distributed, formally recognized in workload calculations and performance evaluations, and adequately resourced. Black women in leadership should not be expected to serve as the institutional solution to structural inequities without commensurate authority, compensation, and support.

Implications

Implications for Positive Social impact

At the individual level, the findings of this study validate and amplify the experiences of Black women in higher education leadership whose realities have too often been minimized, pathologized, or rendered invisible within institutional and scholarly discourse. By centering these women's narratives and situating their experiences within a structural and theoretical frame, this research provides a foundation for understanding, and ultimately addressing, the systemic forces that constrain their

leadership. For Black women themselves, this study affirms that the barriers they encounter are real, well-documented, and not attributable to individual deficits in qualification, competence, or commitment. This affirmation carries meaningful psychological and professional significance, particularly in the context of institutional environments that consistently communicate otherwise.

At the organizational level, the findings offer higher education institutions a detailed, empirically grounded account of the specific practices and dynamics that generate and sustain inequity for Black women leaders. Institutions that engage seriously with these findings have an opportunity to translate research into actionable policy reform, revising hiring and promotion processes, restructuring mentoring and sponsorship infrastructure, reconsidering how DEI labor is distributed and recognized, and actively cultivating campus climates that support the advancement and full inclusion of Black women in senior leadership roles.

At the societal level, this study contributes to a growing evidence base documenting the persistence of racialized and gendered inequality in professional leadership beyond the academy. The patterns documented here, the concrete ceiling, intersectional discrimination, tokenism, isolation, and the strategic resilience required in response, are not unique to higher education. They reflect broader social structures that systematically disadvantage Black women across sectors. Research that names and documents these patterns with specificity contributes to a more informed, evidence-based public discourse about the nature and roots of racial and gender inequity in leadership contexts.

For policymakers at the federal, state, and institutional levels, this study underscores the inadequacy of single-axis diversity initiatives and highlights the need for policy frameworks that explicitly account for intersectionality. Affirmative action policies, DEI mandates, and equity auditing requirements that address race and gender as separate rather than compounding categories leave Black women's experiences inadequately addressed. Policymakers should design and implement frameworks that center intersectional equity as a core rather than subsidiary principle of diversity governance.

Methodological and Theoretical Implications

This study contributes methodologically to the growing body of qualitative research on Black women in leadership by demonstrating the value of a research design that centers participant voice, employs rigorous trustworthiness strategies, and explicitly situates findings within a theoretical framework that is epistemologically congruent with the lived realities of the population under study. The consistent use of direct quotations, the documentation of discrepant cases, and the commitment to thick description throughout the findings chapter reflect a methodological commitment to honoring the complexity and specificity of participants' experiences rather than flattening them into categorical summaries.

Theoretically, the findings extend the application of Black Feminist Thought to the specific context of higher education leadership, demonstrating its continued utility and explanatory power for understanding how Black women navigate institutions of power. The alignment between BFT's central constructs, outsider-within,

intersectionality, self-definition, collective consciousness, and resistance as knowledge production, and the themes that emerged from participant narratives affirms the theoretical framework's fitness for this line of inquiry and its capacity to generate insights that alternative frameworks would obscure.

Conclusion

Black women in senior higher education leadership roles are present, persistent, and powerful, and they are navigating institutional environments that too often work systematically against them. This study documented, in the words of seven Black women who have achieved and sustained leadership at the dean level and above, the pervasive and multifaceted nature of the bias and barriers they encounter. They described concrete ceilings that resist individual effort, intersectional discrimination that compounds the effects of race and gender, profound professional isolation, the exhausting paradox of hypervisibility and invisibility, and the strategic resilience required to survive and lead effectively in environments that were not designed to include them.

These findings are not stories of individual struggle. They are evidence of structural realities that have persisted across decades of ostensible progress in diversity, equity, and inclusion in American higher education. The underrepresentation of Black women in senior higher education leadership is not an accident, a pipeline problem, or a reflection of individual deficits in preparation or ambition. It is the predictable outcome of systemic conditions that this study has documented with specificity and care.

And yet the women who participated in this study are not only witnesses to inequity, they are architects of resistance. They build coalitions, mentor the next

generation, advocate for structural change from within institutions that resist change, and lead with a clarity of purpose that reflects both the weight and the meaning of their positions. As Rome stated, “My resilience is not evidence that the system is working. It is evidence that I have refused to let the system win.” That refusal, sustained over decades, across institutions, and across every dimension of a professional life, is an act of leadership in itself.

The findings of this study contribute to scholarship on diversity, equity, and inclusion in higher education and offer a foundation for further inquiry, institutional action, and policy reform. By centering the voices of Black women leaders, this research honors the epistemological core of BFT, that those who have been marginalized hold knowledge that is essential to understanding and transforming the systems that marginalize them. That knowledge, documented here, demands a response. The measure of this study's contribution will be found not only in the scholarship it generates but in the institutional change it inspires.

References

- Adamovic, M., & Leibbrandt, A. (2024). Ethnic minorities and the leadership glass cliff: Insights into a field experiment. *Industrial Relations: A Journal of Economy and Society*, 64(3), 380–394. <https://doi.org/10.1111/irel.12378>
- Adeoye-Olatunde, O. A., & Olenik, N. L. (2021). Research and scholarly methods: Semi-structured interviews. *JACCP: Journal for the American College of Clinical Pharmacy*, 4(10), 1358–1367. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jac5.1441>
- Aldadi, A., Robb, K. A., & Williamson, A. (2024). Factors influencing multiple non-utilised healthcare appointments from patients' and healthcare providers' perspectives: A qualitative systematic review of the global literature. *BJGP Open*, 8(4), BJGPO.2024.0075. <https://doi.org/10.3399/bjgpo.2024.0075>
- Ali, A. A., & Hayes-Burrell, I. M. (2024). Leading from the margins: An intersectional qualitative analysis of the leadership experiences of Black mothers. *Open Journal of Business and Management*, 12, 563–614. <https://doi.org/10.4236/ojbm.2024.121034>
- Alinia, M. (2015). On Black feminist thought: Thinking oppression and resistance through intersectional paradigm. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 38(13), 2334–2340. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2015.1058492>
- American Association of University Professors. (2022). The 2022 AAUP survey of tenure practices. <https://www.aaup.org/report/2022-aaup-survey-tenure-practices>

- American Association of University Women. (2021). Fast facts: Women of color in higher ed. AAUW: Empowering Women Since 1881.
<https://www.aauw.org/resources/article/fast-facts-woc-higher-ed/>
- American Council on Education. (2023). American college president study 2023.
<https://www.acenet.edu/Documents/American-College-President-IX-2023.pdf>
- American Law Library. (2018). Institutional eligibility under the higher education act of 1965, as amended, and the secretary's recognition of accrediting agencies (US Department of Education regulation) (2018 ed.). CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform.
- Babic, A., & Hansez, I. (2021). The glass ceiling for women managers: Antecedents and consequences for work-family interface and well-being at work. *Frontiers in Psychology, 12*. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.618250>
- Becks-Moody, G. M. (2004). African American women administrators in higher education: Exploring the challenges and experiences at Louisiana public colleges and universities (Order No. 3151818) [Doctoral dissertation]. ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global. <https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/african-american-women-administrators-higher/docview/305171832/se-2>
- Billups, F. D. (2020). *Qualitative data collection tools: Design, development, and applications* (1st ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Billups, S., Thelamour, B., Thibodeau, P., & Durgin, F. H. (2022). On intersectionality: Visualizing the invisibility of Black women. *Cognitive Research: Principles and Implications, 7*(1). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s41235-022-00450-1>

- Bitar, J., Montague, G., & Ilano, L. (2022). Faculty diversity and student success go hand in hand, so why are university faculties so White? The Education Trust.
<https://edtrust.org/resource/faculty-diversity-and-student-success-go-hand-in-hand-so-why-are-university-faculties-so-white/>
- Black women in higher education: Defining a space/finding a place. (2021). In L. Morley & V. Walsh (Eds.), *Feminist academics* (pp. 149–159). Taylor & Francis.
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203482506-16>
- Bohnet, I., Hauser, O. P., & Kristal, A. S. (2025). Can gender and race dynamics in performance appraisals be disrupted? The case of social influence. *Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization*, 235, 107032.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jebo.2025.107032>
- Boykin, C. C. (2022). An examination of the underrepresentation of Black women in senior leadership roles at predominantly White institutions (PWIs): Exploring the narratives of mid-level managers [Doctoral dissertation, University of New Orleans]. University of New Orleans Theses and Dissertations.
<https://scholarworks.uno.edu/td/2950>
- Breeden, R. L. (2021). Our presence is resistance: Stories of Black women in senior-level student affairs positions at predominantly White institutions. NASPA—Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education. <https://www.naspa.org/blog/our-presence-is-resistance-stories-of-black-women-in-senior-level-student-affairs-positions-at-predominantly-white-institutions>

- Bright, D. A. (2010). *Pioneering women: Black women as senior leaders in traditionally White community colleges* (UMI No. 3397642) [Doctoral dissertation]. ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global. <https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/pioneering-women-black-as-senior-leaders/docview/205403709/se-2>
- Burgett, B., & Hendler, G. (2020). *Keywords for American cultural studies* (3rd ed.). NYU Press.
- Burton, L. J., Cyr, D., & Weiner, J. (2020). "Unbroken, but bent": Gendered racism in school leadership. *Frontiers in Education, 5*.
<https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2020.00052>
- Bush, J. A. (2025). The role of sponsorship and mentorship in overcoming racial barriers to healthcare leadership for African Americans. *International Journal of Scientific Research and Management, 13*(03), 1414–1417.
<https://doi.org/10.18535/ijssrm/v13i03.mp02>
- Bush, T. (2025). Mentoring and leadership in higher education: A critical review. *Journal of Educational Administration, 63*(1), 3–18. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JEA-07-2024-0174>
- Carbado, D. W., & Gulati, M. (2015). *Acting White?: Rethinking race in "post-racial" America* (Reprint ed.). Oxford University Press.
- Ceylan, M., & Mnzile, J. (2024). The impact of mentorship and sponsorship on women's career development. In *Advances in educational marketing, administration, and leadership* (pp. 429–448). IGI Global. <https://doi.org/10.4018/979-8-3693-6880-0.ch020>

- Chance, N. L. (2021a). A phenomenological inquiry into the influence of crucible experiences on the leadership development of Black women in higher education senior leadership. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 49(4), 601–623. <https://doi.org/10.1177/17411432211019417>
- Chance, N. L. (2021b). Resilient leadership: A phenomenological exploration into how Black women in higher education leadership navigate cultural adversity. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00221678211003000>
- Chancellor, R. L. (2019). Racial battle fatigue: The unspoken burden of Black women faculty in LIS. *Journal of Education for Library and Information Science*, 60(3), 182–189. <https://doi.org/10.3138/jelis.2019-0007>
- Clance, P., & Imes, S. (1978). The imposter phenomenon in high achieving women: Dynamics and therapeutic intervention. *Psychotherapy: Theory, Research & Practice*, 15(3), 241–247. <https://doi.org/10.1037/h0086006>
- Colby, G. (2020, December). Data snapshot: Women and faculty of color [PDF]. American Association of University Professors. https://www.aaup.org/sites/default/files/Dec-2020_Data_Snapshot_Women_and_Faculty_of_Color.pdf
- College and University Professional Association for Human Resources. (2021). Explore the data: The promotion of women and people of color in higher ed faculty. <https://www.cupahr.org/surveys/research-briefs/explore-the-data-the-promotion-of-women-and-people-of-color-in-higher-ed-faculty/>

- Cokley, K. O., Bernard, D. L., Stone-Sabali, S., & Awad, G. H. (2024). Impostor phenomenon in racially/ethnically minoritized groups: Current knowledge and future directions. *Annual Review of Clinical Psychology, 20*(1), 407–430. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-clinpsy-081122-015724>
- Cokley, K., Smith, L., Bernard, D., Hurst, A., Jackson, S., Stone, S., Awosogba, O., Saucer, C., Bailey, M., & Roberts, D. (2017). Impostor feelings as a moderator and mediator of the relationship between perceived discrimination and mental health among racial/ethnic minority college students. *Journal of Counseling Psychology, 64*(2), 141–154. <https://doi.org/10.1037/cou0000198>
- Collins, P. H. (1986). Learning from the outsider within: The sociological significance of Black feminist thought. *Social Problems, 33*(6), S14–S32. <https://doi.org/10.2307/800672>
- Collins, P. H. (1990). Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment. Unwin Hyman.
- Collins, P. H. (2002). Black feminist thought (2nd ed.). Routledge.
- Collins, P. H. (2018). Black feminist thought. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203900055>
- Collins, P. H. (2022). Black feminist thought, 30th anniversary edition: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment (1st ed.). Routledge.
- Collins, P. H., & Bilge, S. (2016). Intersectionality (1st ed.). Polity.
- Crenshaw, K. (2019). Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A Black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory, and antiracist politics

[1989]. In *Feminist legal theory* (pp. 57–80). Routledge.

<https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429500480-5>

Crenshaw, K. (2022). *On intersectionality: Essential writings*. The New Press.

Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D. (2023). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (6th ed.). SAGE Publications.

Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2024). *Qualitative inquiry and research design* (5th ed.). SAGE Publications.

Daskalopoulou, A. (2024). Understanding the impact of biased student evaluations: An intersectional analysis of academics' experiences in the UK higher education context. *Studies in Higher Education*, 49(12), 2411–2422.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2024.2306364>

Davis, D. R., & Maldonado, C. (2015). Shattering the glass ceiling: The leadership development of African American women in higher education. *Advancing Women in Leadership Journal*, 35, 48–64.

Dickens, D. D., Womack, V. Y., & Dimes, T. (2019). Managing hypervisibility: An exploration of theory and research on identity shifting strategies in the workplace among Black women. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 113, 153–163.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jvb.2018.10.008>

Disch, L., & Hawkesworth, M. (Eds.). (2015). *The Oxford handbook of feminist theory*. Oxford University Press.

<https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199328581.001.0001>

- Dixon, L. C. (2023). Understanding the interlocking oppressive systems within higher education restricting the professional progression of Black women. *Hastings Journal on Gender and the Law*, 34(2), 135–146.
<https://repository.uclawsf.edu/hwlj/vol34/iss2/14>
- Doggett, J. A. (2019, October 10). Imposter syndrome hits harder when you're Black. HuffPost. https://www.huffpost.com/entry/imposter-syndrome-racism-discrimination_1_5d9f2c00e4b06ddfc514ec5c
- Erskine, S. E., Archibold, E., & Bilimoria, D. (2021). Afro-diasporic women navigating the Black ceiling: Individual, relational, and organizational strategies. *Business Horizons*, 64(1), 37–50. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bushor.2020.10.004>
- Fields, L. N., & Cunningham-Williams, R. M. (2021). Experiences with imposter syndrome and authenticity at research-intensive schools of social work. *Advances in Social Work*, 21(2/3), 354–373. <https://doi.org/10.18060/24124>
- Flores, L. Y., & Rhames, A. (2025). Women of color psychologists as leaders in higher education. *Women & Therapy*, 48(1), 7–23.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/02703149.2025.2455824>
- Flowers-Taylor, S. P. (2021). The resilience of Black female leaders in higher education and racial microaggression [Doctoral dissertation, University of New England]. Educational Leadership Commons.
<https://dune.une.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1394&context=theses>

- Fourtané, S. (2021, May 7). Black women in higher ed fight adversity to become strong leaders. Fierce Network. <https://www.fierce-network.com/administration/black-women-higher-ed-fight-adversity-to-become-strong-leaders>
- Gamble, E. D., & Turner, N. J. (2015). Career ascension of African American women in executive positions in postsecondary institutions. *Journal of Organizational Culture, Communications, and Conflict*, 19(1), 82–101.
- Gender, race, and ethnicity of college administrators, faculty, and staff, fall 2015. (2017). Chronicle of Higher Education Almanac of Higher Education. <https://www.chronicle.com/article/gender-race-and-ethnicity-of-college-administrators-faculty-and-staff-fall-2015/>
- Georgiadis, C. (2020, July 15). Dr. Leilani Carver-Madalon: How one can thrive despite experiencing imposter syndrome. Medium. <https://medium.com/authority-magazine/dr-leilani-carver-madalon-how-one-can-thrive-despite-experiencing-impostor-syndrome-f46f61132c12>
- Givens, J. R. (2021). *Fugitive pedagogy: Carter G. Woodson and the art of Black teaching*. Harvard University Press.
- Glass Ceiling Commission. (1991). Glass ceiling commission report [Report]. https://www.archives.gov/files/records-mgmt/rcs/schedules/independent-agencies/rg-0220/n1-220-95-007_sf115.pdf
- Glover, M. H. (2012). Existing pathways: A historical overview of Black women in higher education administration. In *Pathways to higher education administration for African American women* (pp. 4–17). Stylus Publishing.

- Guest, G., Namey, E., & Chen, M. (2020). A simple method to assess and report thematic saturation in qualitative research. *PLOS ONE*, *15*(5), e0232076.
<https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0232076>
- Gutierrez, D., Lappan, S., & Rajaei, A. (2025). Breaking barriers: Celebrating the resiliency of women in academia and initiating institutional change. *International Journal of Systemic Therapy*, 1–23.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/2692398x.2025.2499760>
- Hall, N. M., Dickens, D. D., Minor, K. A., Thomas, Z., Mitchell, C., & Johnson, N. (2025). The strong Black woman stereotype and identity shifting among Black women in academic and other professional spaces. *Women's Health*, *21*.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/17455057251335358>
- Harley, D. A. (2007). Maids of academe: African American women faculty at predominantly White institutions. *Journal of African American Studies*, *12*(1), 19–36. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12111-007-9030-5>
- Hawley, K. (2019). What is impostor syndrome? *Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume*, *93*(1), 203–226. <https://doi.org/10.1093/arisup/akz003>
- Hennink, M., Marconi, V. C., & Kaiser, B. N. (2022). Sample sizes for saturation in qualitative research: A systematic review of empirical tests. *Social Science & Medicine*, *292*, 114523. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2021.114523>
- Henry, D. J., & Glenn, N. M. (2017). Black women employed in the ivory tower: Connecting for success. *Advancing Women in Leadership Journal*, *29*.
<https://doi.org/10.21423/awlj-v29.a271>

- hooks, b. (1999). *Ain't I a woman: Black women and feminism*. South End Press.
- Iheduru-Anderson, K. (2025). The burdens of underrepresentation and professional identity: A qualitative study of Black women in academic nursing. *Global Qualitative Nursing Research, 12*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/23333936251360542>
- Iheduru-Anderson, K. C., Moore, S. S., & Okoro, F. (2022). The voice of Black academic nurse leaders in the United States: A qualitative study. *Journal of Professional Nursing, 39*, 84–95. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.profnurs.2022.01.007>
- Iheduru-Anderson, K. C., & Shingles, R. (2023). Mentoring experience for career advancement: The perspectives of Black women academic nurse leaders. *Global Qualitative Nursing Research, 10*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/23333936231155051>
- Iheduru-Anderson, K., Waite, R., & Murray, T. A. (2024). Invisibility/hypervisibility paradox for Black women navigating the nursing academic environment. *Nursing Outlook, 72*(6), 102291. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.outlook.2024.102291>
- Irshad Ahmad Reshi, T. Sudha, & Shabir Ahmad Dar. (2022). Women's access to education and its impact on their empowerment: A comprehensive review. *MORFAI Journal, 1*(2), 446–450. <https://doi.org/10.54443/morfai.v1i2.760>
- Isangula, K., Kelly, S., & Wamoyi, J. (2024). Manual qualitative data coding using MS Word for students and early career researchers in resource-constrained settings. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods, 23*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069241299223>

- Jackson, J., & Flowers, L. (2003). Retaining African American student affairs administrators: Voices from the field. *College Student Affairs Journal*, 22(2), 125–136.
- Jean-Marie, G., Williams, V. A., & Sherman, S. L. (2009). Black women's leadership experiences: Examining the intersectionality of race and gender. *Advances in Developing Human Resources*, 11(5), 562–581.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1523422309351836>
- Jha, A. (2023). *Social research methodology: Qualitative and quantitative*. Taylor & Francis.
- Johnson, D., & Delmas, P. (2022). Promoting diverse leadership: An examination of professional experiences and career advancement perceptions of Black women in higher education. *Advancing Women in Leadership Journal*, 41(1), 89–102.
<https://doi.org/10.21423/awlj-v41.a417>
- Johnson, N. N. (2022a). Intersectionality in leadership. In *Advances in human resources management and organizational development* (pp. 213–238). IGI Global.
<https://doi.org/10.4018/978-1-6684-3564-9.ch011>
- Johnson, N. N., & Fournillier, J. B. (2021). Intersectionality and leadership in context: Examining the intricate paths of four Black women in educational leadership in the United States. *International Journal of Leadership in Education*, 26(2), 296–317. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603124.2020.1818132>

- Johnson, T. B. (2022b). Experiences of Black women diversity practitioners in historically White institutions (5th ed.). IGI Global. <https://doi.org/10.4018/978-1-6684-3564-9>
- Kanter, R. (1977). Some effects of proportions on group life: Skewed sex ratios and responses to token women. *American Journal of Sociology*, 82(5), 965–990. <https://doi.org/10.1086/226425>
- Keen, S., Lomeli-Rodriguez, M., & Joffe, H. (2022). From challenge to opportunity: Virtual qualitative research during COVID-19 and beyond. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 21. <https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069221105075>
- Khan, T., & MacEachen, E. (2022). An alternative method of interviewing: Critical reflections on videoconference interviews for qualitative data collection. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 21. <https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069221090063>
- Khosroshahi, H. (2021). The concrete ceiling. *Stanford Social Innovation Review*. <https://doi.org/10.48558/7KAE-D993>
- Kruse, S. (2022). "I am the chair": Women and department leadership in the academy. *Frontiers in Education*, 7. <https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2022.814581>
- Laranjo, L. (2016). Social media and health behavior change. In *Participatory health through social media* (pp. 83–111). Elsevier. <https://doi.org/10.1016/b978-0-12-809269-9.00006-2>
- Lawson, M., Martin, A. E., Huda, I., & Matz, S. C. (2022). Hiring women into senior leadership positions is associated with a reduction in gender stereotypes in

- organizational language. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 119(9). <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2026443119>
- Lewis, J. A., & Williams, M. G. (2023). Applying Black feminist theory to research, practice, and advocacy on gendered racism among Black women. *Women & Therapy*, 46(3), 229–245. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02703149.2023.2275934>
- Liao, K.-H., Wei, M., & Yin, M. (2019). The misunderstood schema of the strong Black woman: Exploring its mental health consequences and coping responses among African American women. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 44(1), 84–104. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0361684319883198>
- Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry* (1st ed.). SAGE.
- Maylor, U., Roberts, L., Linton, K., & Arday, J. (2021). Race and educational leadership: The influence of research methods and critical theorising in understanding representation, roles, and ethnic disparities. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 49(4), 553–564. <https://doi.org/10.1177/17411432211022770>
- Mbilishaka, A., Vixamar-Owens, D. Z., Fredericks, A., & Massey, A. (2023). Dialogues in leadership herstory: Exploring the experiences of Black women faculty in a leadership-development program. *Consulting Psychology Journal*, 75(1), 119–134. <https://doi.org/10.1037/cpb0000228>
- McChesney, C. M. (2013). *The woman suffrage movement in America* (2nd ed.). Cambridge University Press.

- McChesney, J. (2018). Representation and pay of women of color in the higher education workforce [Research report]. CUPA-HR. <https://www.cupahr.org/wp-content/uploads/CUPA-HR-Brief-Women-Of-Color.pdf>
- McGee, E. O. (2024). Dying to succeed: Unveiling the (un)hidden toll of academic advancement for Black women. *Qualitative Inquiry*, *31*(7), 705–714. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10778004241269969>
- McKinsey & Company. (2020). Women in the workplace: Corporate America is at a critical crossroads. Lean In. https://wiw-report.s3.amazonaws.com/Women_in_the_Workplace_2020.pdf
- Mitchell, K. J., & Shivde, G. (2023). Generalizability in psychology research: Beware the grinch. *Journal of Applied Research in Memory and Cognition*, *12*(2), 180–184. <https://doi.org/10.1037/mac0000118>
- Moody, A. T., Lewis, J. A., & Owens, G. P. (2022). Gendered racism, coping, and traumatic stress among Black women: The moderating roles of the strong Black woman schema and womanist attitudes. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, *47*(2), 197–212. <https://doi.org/10.1177/03616843221143752>
- Morley, L., & Walsh, V. (Eds.). (1995). *Feminist academics: Creative agents for change*. Taylor & Francis. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203482506>
- Moses, Y. T. (1989). *Black women in academe: Issues and strategies*. Association of American Colleges.
- National Center for Education Statistics. (2022). Employees in degree-granting postsecondary institutions, by race/ethnicity, sex, employment status, control and

level of institution, and primary occupation: Fall 2020 [Data set].

https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d21/tables/dt21_314.40.asp

National Center for Education Statistics. (2024). Characteristics of postsecondary faculty.

Condition of Education. U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences. <https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator/csc>

Nirmul, U., Cabrejo, P., & Smith, C. (2023). Leadership development of women of color in occupational therapy: A qualitative intersectional analysis. *The American Journal of Occupational Therapy, 77*(6).

<https://doi.org/10.5014/ajot.2023.050331>

Noble, J. L. (1993). *Beautiful, also, are the souls of my Black sisters: A history of the Black woman in America*. Prentice-Hall.

Oliffe, J. L., Kelly, M. T., Gonzalez Montaner, G., & Yu Ko, W. F. (2021). Zoom interviews: Benefits and concessions. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods, 20*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069211053522>

Olmos-Vega, F. M., Stalmeijer, R. E., Varpio, L., & Kahlke, R. (2023). A practical guide to reflexivity in qualitative research: AMEE guide no. 149. *Medical Teacher, 45*(3), 241–251. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0142159x.2022.2057287>

Parker, P. (2015). The historical role of women in higher education. *Administrative Issues Journal: Education, Practice, and Research, 5*(1).

<https://doi.org/10.5929/2015.5.1.1>

Patton, M. Q. (2015). *Qualitative research & evaluation methods: Integrating theory and practice* (4th ed.). SAGE Publications.

- Pedota, J., Garces, L. M., Epstein, E., Ngaosi, N., & Khalayleh, N. (2025). "We're on our own out here": Faculty member responses to legislative threats to academic freedom and scholarship on race. *Journal of Higher Education*, 1–28.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00221546.2025.2461986>
- Pogrebna, G., Angelopoulos, S., Motsi-Omoijiade, I., Kharlamov, A., & Tkachenko, N. (2024). The impact of intersectional racial and gender biases on minority female leadership over two centuries. *Scientific Reports*, 14(1).
<https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-023-50392-x>
- Porter, C. J., Green, Q., Daniels, M., & Smola, M. (2019). Black women's socialization and identity development in college: Advancing Black feminist thought. *Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice*, 57(3), 253–265.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/19496591.2019.1683021>
- Price, J. H., & Murnan, J. (2004). Research limitations and the necessity of reporting them. *American Journal of Health Education*, 35(2), 66–67.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/19325037.2004.10603611>
- Priddie, C., Leath, S., Hurd, N., Robertson, C., & Wilson, J. (2022). Centering Black women faculty: Magnifying powerful voices. *To Improve the Academy: A Journal of Educational Development*, 41(2). <https://doi.org/10.3998/tia.246>
- Ramdeo, J. (2023). Black women educators' stories of intersectional invisibility: Experiences of hindered careers and workplace psychological harm in school environments. *Educational Review*, 77(2), 475–494.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00131911.2023.2217358>

- Rankin, Y. A., & Irish, I. (2020). A seat at the table. *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction*, 4(CSCW2), 1–26. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3415188>
- Reinwald, M., Zaia, J., & Kunze, F. (2022). Shine bright like a diamond: When signaling creates glass cliffs for female executives. *Journal of Management*, 49(3), 1005–1036. <https://doi.org/10.1177/01492063211067518>
- Rennison, C., & Bonomi, A. (Eds.). (2019). *Women leading change in academia: Breaking the glass ceiling, cliff, and slipper*. Cognella Academic Publishing.
- Robinson, A. M. (2023). Mentoring is the minimum. In *Advances in logistics, operations, and management science* (pp. 179–195). IGI Global. <https://doi.org/10.4018/978-1-6684-3827-5.ch009>
- Ryan, M. K., & Haslam, S. A. (2007). The glass cliff: Exploring the dynamics surrounding the appointment of women to precarious leadership positions. *The Academy of Management Review*, 32(2), 549–572. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20159315>
- Saldaña, J. (2021). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers* (4th ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Sanchez-Hucles, J. V., & Davis, D. D. (2010). Women and women of color in leadership: Complexity, identity, and intersectionality. *American Psychologist*, 65(3), 171–181. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0017459>
- Sevelius, J. M., Gutierrez-Mock, L., Zamudio-Haas, S., McCree, B., Ngo, A., Jackson, A., Clynes, C., Venegas, L., Salinas, A., Herrera, C., Stein, E., Operario, D., & Gamarel, K. (2020). Research with marginalized communities: Challenges to

- continuity during the COVID-19 pandemic. *AIDS and Behavior*, 24(7), 2009–2012. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10461-020-02920-3>
- Showunmi, V. (2023). Visible, invisible: Black women in higher education. *Frontiers in Sociology*, 8. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fsoc.2023.974617>
- Showunmi, V., & Tomlin, C. (2023). *Understanding and managing sophisticated and everyday racism: Implications for education and work*. Lexington Books.
- Sim, E., & Bierema, L. (2024). A systematic literature review of intersectional leadership in the workplace: The landscape and framework for future leadership research and practice to challenge interlocking systems of oppression. *Journal of Leadership & Organizational Studies*, 32(1), 71–93. <https://doi.org/10.1177/15480518241292214>
- Singh, K., & Williams-Green, J. (1995). Differences in perceptions of African American women and men faculty and administrators. *Journal of Negro Education*, 64(4), 401–408. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2967263>
- Smith, A. N., Watkins, M. B., Ladge, J. J., & Carlton, P. (2018). Interviews with 59 Black female executives explore intersectional invisibility and strategies to overcome it. *Harvard Business Review Digital Articles*, 2–6.
- Stewart, Q. M. (2024). Persistence and resistance: Black women navigating barriers in higher education. The Century Foundation. <https://tcf.org/content/report/persistence-and-resistance-black-women-navigating-barriers-in-higher-education/>

- Taparia, M., & Lenka, U. (2022). An integrated conceptual framework of the glass ceiling effect. *Journal of Organizational Effectiveness: People and Performance*, 9(3), 372–400. <https://doi.org/10.1108/joepp-06-2020-0098>
- Thomas, K. M. (2019). Leading as "the other." *Journal of Leadership & Organizational Studies*, 26(3), 402–406. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1548051819849005>
- Tisdell, E. J., Merriam, S. B., & Stuckey-Peyrot, H. (2025). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation* (5th ed.). Jossey-Bass.
- Townsend, C. V. (2020). Identity politics: Why African American women are missing in administrative leadership in public higher education. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 49(4), 584–600. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143220935455>
- Tufford, L., & Newman, P. (2010). Bracketing in qualitative research. *Qualitative Social Work*, 11(1), 80–96. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1473325010368316>
- Weiner, J., Garrett-Walker, W., Strickland, T., & Burton, L. (2022). Reifying discrimination on the path to school leadership: Black female principals' experiences of district hiring/promotion practices. *Frontiers in Education*, 7. <https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2022.925510>
- West, N. M., & Porter, C. J. (2023). The state of Black women in higher education: A critical perspective 20 years later. *New Directions for Student Services*, 2023(182), 9–13. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ss.20463>

Wingfield, A. (2010). Are some emotions marked "Whites only"? Racialized feeling rules in professional workplaces. *Social Problems*, 57(2), 251–268.
<https://doi.org/10.1525/sp.2010.57.2.251>

Appendix A: Codebook

Codebook: Theme 1, Navigating the Invisible Barriers

Code Name	Short Definition	Long Definition	Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria	Exemplar Quotation
Structural Exclusion	Blocked from opportunity by system, not individual	Participant describes being denied access to roles, titles, committees, or institutional resources through processes or practices that are systemic and not reducible to any single actor's decision.	References to opaque promotion criteria; cancelled searches; being excluded from committees; institutional non-recognition of contributions.	Interpersonal snubs or individual rudeness not embedded in institutional process; exclusion based on personality conflict without structural dimension.	Dubai: 'Instead of going through the interview process, they canceled the search... they redid the search months later and hired a white man.'
Concrete Ceiling	Unbreakable structural limit on advancement	Participant describes or implies a ceiling on advancement that resists individual merit, credentials, or effort, a structural limit that operates independently of qualifications.	Language about ceilings, hitting limits, being passed over despite qualifications; awareness that advancement has a structural cap.	Glass ceiling language focused only on gender without racial dimension; references to normal competition outcomes.	Amsterdam: 'You\'re a director now. You almost made it. To the ceiling.' [comment from colleague reflecting institutional messaging about limits]
Title Without Authority	Elevated but under-resourced or under-empowered	Participant describes holding a leadership title that was not accompanied by commensurate decision-making authority, resources, or institutional backing.	Descriptions of being given responsibility without power; of titles that were symbolic rather than substantive.	Legitimate role transitions or temporary scope reductions unrelated to race or gender.	Madrid: 'I was given the responsibility without the power. That is a very specific kind of limitation that looks like opportunity from the outside but functions as containment from within.'
Promotion Opacity	Advancement criteria unclear or selectively enforced	Participant describes promotion or advancement processes in which criteria were unstated, inconsistently applied, or retroactively shifted in ways that disadvantaged the participant.	References to not knowing what was needed to advance; feeling goalposts moved; different standards applied to comparable candidates.	General observations about organizational politics not connected to racial or gender dynamics.	Milan: 'There were roles I applied for... I made it all the way to the top two. The other candidate was an external candidate, white man... [then] they promoted an internal person who was on the interview committee.'

Code Name	Short Definition	Long Definition	Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria	Exemplar Quotation
Search Manipulation	Hiring process altered to prevent Black woman's selection	Participant describes or implies that a search or hiring process was altered, cancelled, or manipulated to prevent a qualified Black woman candidate from being selected.	Cancelled searches; searches restarted after a Black woman was the clear front-runner; insider promotion following failed external search.	Searches cancelled for documented budgetary reasons with no racial dimension; ordinary hiring decisions.	Dubai: 'The Tennessee Higher Education Commission... instead of going through the interview process, they canceled the search. Because I probably would have been the person... they just canceled the search.'
Credential Discounting	Qualifications ignored or minimized	Participant describes experiences in which their educational credentials, professional achievements, or expertise were minimized, ignored, or treated as insufficient by institutional decision-makers.	Being repeatedly introduced as if never met; being questioned about qualifications despite documented record; being underestimated by external parties.	Normal institutional learning curves for new hires; legitimate feedback about skill gaps.	Yokohama: 'In every role that I served, there was always the assumption that I didn't have enough of something... it had to do with the fact that I was a minority female.'
Intra-Institutional Resistance	Opposition from colleagues or subordinates to leadership	Participant describes resistance to their authority or leadership from within the institution, from colleagues, peers, or subordinates, that was connected to their racial or gender identity.	Colleagues questioning decisions; subordinates failing to follow direction; peers treating participant as illegitimate.	Normal professional disagreement or healthy institutional discourse unconnected to identity.	Rome: '[The provost] slammed his hand on the table and said, 'Look. I've told you. I'm not going to fill that position.' That would not have happened to a white male president.'
Access Deficit	Excluded from informal networks of power	Participant describes lacking access to informal social networks, spaces, or relationships through which institutional decisions are made, information flows, and advancement opportunities are generated.	Being out of the loop on informal decisions; not being included in informal gatherings; having to formally broker access that peers received automatically.	Preference-based social relationships unrelated to institutional power.	Rome: 'There are always the inside jokes... they socialize in the same circles... that makes me feel like I have to play catch up.'

Codebook: Theme 2, *The Weight of Dual Marginalization*

Code Name	Short Definition	Long Definition	Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria	Exemplar Quotation
Intersectional Labeling	Stereotyped through race-and-gender lens simultaneously	Participant describes being labeled or characterized using language rooted in racialized and gendered stereotypes, particularly the 'angry Black woman' trope, in response to professional conduct that would not have triggered the same label in a non-Black or male colleague.	Direct use of words like 'aggressive,' 'too much,' 'difficult,' 'emotional' applied to participant in professional contexts where comparable conduct from others was not so labeled.	Labels applied based on documented unprofessional conduct without racial or gendered dimension; self-identification with strength or assertiveness.	Amsterdam: 'I got a call to meet afterwards, and it was, oh, you was aggressive in that meeting. No one who has ever described me or interacted with me has ever called me aggressive. But I was holding my team accountable.'
Double Standard in Evaluation	Same behavior judged differently by race and gender	Participant describes observing or experiencing differential standards in how professional conduct, communication style, or leadership decisions were evaluated based on racial and gender identity.	Comparisons between own treatment and treatment of white or male counterparts in equivalent situations; awareness of unequal standards.	Legitimate differences in feedback based on documented performance differences.	Milan: 'I have watched colleagues behave in ways that would have ended my career, and they were called strong leaders. I was called difficult.'
Communication Tax	Self-monitoring and restrained communication required	Participant describes having to calibrate, soften, or restrain their professional communication in ways they would not otherwise choose, specifically to manage others' racialized and gendered reactions, incurring a cognitive and emotional tax.	Descriptions of choosing when to speak, how to phrase things, which battles to pick, because of awareness of how expression will be received as a Black woman.	Normal professional communication calibration applicable to all leaders regardless of race or gender.	Amsterdam: 'I learned to soften everything. Not because I believed I needed to, but because the cost of not softening was too high. And that is a tax that my White male colleagues do not pay.'
Intersectional Evaluation Lens	Leadership assessed through simultaneous race and gender filter	Participant describes awareness that their leadership decisions, style, and professional presentation are always evaluated through a combined	References to being perceived as 'Black and a woman' simultaneously in evaluation contexts; awareness that the	General awareness of being a minority without explicit intersectional framing.	Rome: 'I am never just a woman in the room, and I am never just a Black person in the room. I am always both simultaneously. And the people in

Code Name	Short Definition	Long Definition	Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria	Exemplar Quotation
		racial and gendered lens, not one or the other independently.	composite image differs from how white or male peers are seen.		the room respond to that whether they recognize it or not.'
Name-Based Bias	Racially or culturally coded name triggers discount	Participant describes experiences in which a name perceived as distinctively African American triggered presumptive discounting or misidentification prior to professional interaction.	References to name being mispronounced repeatedly; awareness that name signals racial identity on paper; experiences of initial discounting that resolved once interaction occurred.	Unfamiliarity with names that is genuinely cultural and not rooted in racial prejudice.	Dubai: 'My name is non-traditional... this person would repeatedly mispronounce my name, or he might repeatedly underestimate my skills or abilities... he would sometimes even walk in the room like, and I'd have to introduce myself every time as if he had never met me.'
Emotional Labor Inversion	Black woman cast as source of harm when naming inequity	Participant describes experiences in which their professional conduct, particularly direct communication, advocacy, or naming of inequity, was reframed by colleagues or supervisors as harmful to others, inverting the relational dynamic and positioning the participant as the aggressor.	Colleagues crying in response to direct professional communication; participant being asked to 'soften' approach following colleague's emotional reaction; participant being blamed for creating discomfort when naming structural problems.	Genuine interpersonal conflict unconnected to race or gender dynamics.	Milan: 'A colleague of mine started crying... basically I had done nothing just speaking direct and to the point about the project... it was soon after that, it's like now I have a mark on me that I made some woman cry.'
Physical Presentation Tax	Additional burden of managing racial self-presentation in public	Participant describes experiencing a heightened burden related to how they physically present in public, including dress, hair, and general appearance, as a function of being a Black woman in a visible leadership role.	Descriptions of feeling unable to appear in public as a regular person; awareness that how they look in community settings is perceived as representing their race; hair and dress choices as professional strategy.	General professional norms around appearance applicable to all leaders.	Delhi: 'When you're a leader, especially in a rural area, I'm a leader on campus. But it's such a small world. And I'm a leader outside too... it doesn't just shut off once I leave the campus.'

Codebook: Theme 3, Isolation, and the Outsider-Within Experience

Code Name	Short Definition	Long Definition	Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria	Exemplar Quotation
Singularity / Being the Only	Sole Black woman at leadership level	Participant describes being the only Black woman, or one of very few Black women, in a leadership role at their institution or in comparable professional spaces.	Direct statements about being the only; descriptions of the loneliness, hyperscrutiny, or representational burden that accompanies singularity.	Being in a minority without the specific burden of singularity in leadership; diversity in non-leadership roles.	Delhi: 'I am literally the only African-American employee, not just woman. But employee here at this college.'
Professional Isolation	Absence of peers who share positionality	Participant describes lacking access to colleagues who share their racial and gendered professional experience, resulting in the absence of genuine peer community at the leadership level.	Processing challenges alone; having no one to check in with; feeling like a team of one; absence of informal solidarity.	Preference for solitude; introversion without structural isolation dimension.	Delhi: 'There is no one to check in with. There is no one who has had the same experience in that building. When something happens... I processed it alone. And then I went back to work.'
Mentorship Gap	Guidance present but sponsorship absent	Participant describes having access to mentors who provided advice and guidance, but lacking sponsors, senior institutional figures willing to actively advocate on their behalf in spaces where they were not present.	Distinction between advice-givers and door-openers; experiences of being advised but not advocated for; lack of people saying participant's name in rooms they weren't in.	Mentorship experiences that included genuine sponsorship; participants who had both mentors and sponsors.	Amsterdam: 'Mentors give you advice. Sponsors open doors. I had several people who were willing to give me advice. Finding someone willing to go into a room I was not in and say my name, that was much harder.'
Relational Unsafety	Inability to trust institutional relationships	Participant describes navigating their institutional environment with a heightened awareness of relational risk, uncertainty about who could be trusted, what was politically motivated, and what relationships were safe to build.	Descriptions of having to guard oneself; being cautious about trust; recognizing political dimensions of relationships.	Normal professional boundary-setting unconnected to racial or gendered institutional dynamics.	Madrid: 'A sense of cautiousness... trying to figure out who to trust. What might be, to some extent, politically motivated? And having to guard yourself.'
Outsider-Within Dynamic	Present in institution but excluded from	Participant describes occupying a formal institutional role while remaining	Being tolerated rather than included being in the building but not in	Normal new-employee orientation	Madrid: 'I was in the building. I had the title. But I was functioning outside

Code Name	Short Definition	Long Definition	Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria	Exemplar Quotation
	its relational core	relationally, culturally, or socially marginalized from the informal workings of institutional life and power.	the relational infrastructure; formal authority coexisting with informal exclusion.	experiences or role transition periods.	the relational infrastructure of the institution. That is a very particular kind of alone.'
Intra-Community Complexity	Mixed experiences with Black women leaders and peers	Participant describes complicated, ambivalent, or negative experiences with other Black women in institutional contexts, including experiences of being undermined, unsupported, or treated more harshly by Black women supervisors or peers.	Descriptions of being treated harder by Black women supervisors; distrust generated by intra-community dynamics; nuanced accounts of solidarity and competition within the community.	Positive experiences of solidarity with other Black women; accounts of strong Black women networks; generic observations about workplace competition.	Delhi: 'I just don't understand how Black women have been so hard on other Black women... it feels like it's opposite, that they're trying to make it more challenging.'
Cross-Racial Mentorship	Non-Black mentors as primary or unexpected advocates	Participant describes White or non-Black colleagues, particularly men, as among the most substantive mentors or advocates in their professional development, a pattern that diverges from or complements the more typical narrative of cross-racial mentorship limitations.	Specific accounts of White male mentors who invested in participant's development; contrast with less supportive relationships with other minority leaders.	Generally positive relationships with White colleagues not rising to the level of mentorship or sponsorship.	Delhi: 'I can say all of my managers in being a Black woman have not really been good experience... But then I sit down with a Caucasian male president. And they were just seeing things in me that I was like, what?'
Singularity Adaptation Cost	Psychological and emotional price of being the only	Participant describes the cumulative psychological, emotional, or cognitive costs of adapting to environments where they are persistently singular, including exhaustion, hypervigilance, and the performance of belonging.	Descriptions of getting accustomed to singularity but at a cost; adapting without feeling at home; the toll of persistent performance of belonging.	Descriptions of adaptation that do not include acknowledgment of cost or toll.	Yokohama: 'I have spent most of my career being the only one or one of very few. You adapt. You develop strategies. But the adaptation is not free. There is a cost to performing belonging in spaces that have not been designed to include you.'

Codebook: Theme 4, Tokenism, Hypervisibility, and the Burden of Representation

Code Name	Short Definition	Long Definition	Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria	Exemplar Quotation
Symbolic Elevation	Appointed for visibility, not substantive inclusion	Participant describes being elevated into a leadership role in ways that prioritized the institution's diversity optics over genuine inclusion, authority, or resource allocation.	Being brought in as a 'first'; appointment accompanied by limited authority; being visible in ways that served the institution's image without commensurate power.	Appointments that came with full authority and genuine institutional investment.	Dubai: 'I was brought in to be visible. I understood that. I was willing to be that. But the visibility was not accompanied by the full institutional authority the title implied.'
Hypervisibility / Invisibility Paradox	Highly visible as representation, invisible as leader	Participant describes the simultaneous experience of being highly visible as a symbolic representative of diversity while having their substantive contributions, professional authority, and leadership capacity rendered invisible or illegitimate.	Being noticed as a Black woman but not as a leader; symbolic recognition coexisting with substantive discounting.	General visibility that comes with senior leadership roles without the invisibility/legitimacy dimension.	Amsterdam: 'When you are the only one, every decision you make is read as representative... there is no neutral position. Every move is watched and interpreted through a lens I did not design.'
Representational Labor	Expected to serve as cultural expert or diversity ambassador	Participant describes the informal institutional expectation that they serve as the interpreter, representative, or explainer of Black experience for predominantly White colleagues, administrators, or institutional stakeholders.	Being asked to speak for all Black people; being defaulted to for DEI expertise; being expected to educate colleagues on race without compensation or formal recognition.	Voluntary participation in diversity work that the participant initiated and genuinely values.	Milan: 'Every time there was a conversation about race or equity, I was expected to speak for all Black people everywhere. That is an enormous burden.'
Constant Scrutiny	Every action watched and interpreted	Participant describes experiencing a heightened,	Awareness of being watched more than peers; feeling that errors	Normal accountability that comes with seniority.	Dubai: '[When serving as interim president,] it's

Code Name	Short Definition	Long Definition	Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria	Exemplar Quotation
	through identity lens	persistent level of scrutiny in which their professional decisions, communication choices, and personal presentation are continuously interpreted through the lens of their race and gender.	will be disproportionately noted; sense that there is no neutral or unobserved professional action.		fine when you're playing behind the scenes and you're helping assist. But then when you get out front... y'all really don't want me to be successful.'
Racialized Impostor Syndrome	Self-doubt produced and sustained by structural messaging	Participant describes experiences of sustained self-doubt or internal questioning of their right to occupy their leadership role, patterns they identify as produced and reinforced by repeated external institutional signals questioning their legitimacy rather than by personal deficits.	Descriptions of having to work against internal doubt; awareness that doubt is a response to environment; self-questioning in performance contexts.	Healthy professional humility; normal uncertainty in new roles without the racialized structural dimension.	Yokohama: 'The doubt that people experience is not a personality defect. It is a rational response to environments that consistently communicate that you do not belong. You internalize the message that has been sent to you ten thousand times.'
Best Supporting Actor	Positioned to support leadership rather than lead	Participant describes a career pattern in which they were positioned to enable, support, or facilitate the leadership of others, particularly white men, rather than to hold substantive leadership authority themselves.	Being the background person; being told to keep the trains on the tracks; getting support roles rather than principal roles; career reflecting asymmetric recognition.	Legitimate support roles participant genuinely chose without structural constraint.	Dubai: 'I think my career reflects race and gender because I have not been put out front. For real. Black women can be put in this position where you're like the best supporting actor. But never the main character.'

Codebook: Theme 5, Resilience, Resistance, and Strategic Survival

Code Name	Short Definition	Long Definition	Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria	Exemplar Quotation
Village Building	Constructing informal networks of support outside formal channels	Participant describes deliberately constructing informal support networks outside the formal institutional hierarchy, comprising colleagues, mentors, or peers who could provide validation, advocacy, intelligence, or solidarity.	Describing finding or building a village; cultivating cross-functional allies; building informal networks to compensate for absent formal support.	Participation in formal institutional programs or official professional networks.	Amsterdam: 'Find your village... that village may not be in the program or with your leadership team, but you have a village that's supporting you outside of that room.'
Strategic Visibility Management	Calibrating when to be seen versus when to operate below the line	Participant describes deliberately managing their institutional visibility, including when to advocate publicly and when to operate below the line, as a survival strategy in politically volatile environments.	Choosing when to be visible and when not; describing best supporting actor posture as deliberate; calculating when advocacy becomes a target.	General professional discretion or communication calibration applicable to any leader.	Dubai: 'I learned to lead from a position that was slightly below the line of institutional visibility for certain kinds of advocacy... not because I was ashamed of the work, but because being too visible made me a target.'
Faith and Spiritual Anchoring	Spiritual or religious belief as source of perseverance	Participant describes drawing on faith, spirituality, or religious belief as a foundational resource for professional perseverance and resilience.	Explicit references to prayer, faith, God, or spiritual practice as anchoring leadership decisions or sustaining motivation through difficulty.	Vague references to purpose or calling without explicit spiritual framing.	Dubai: 'I would point to two things: my faith in God and my belief that his plans for me are good and that there is nothing anyone who can stand in the way of that.'
Excellence as Strategy	Sustained high performance as protection and advancement tool	Participant describes deliberately pursuing exceptional performance,	Descriptions of doing more than the job required; being called on because of track record;	Normal professional motivation to do good work without the strategic defensive	Rome: 'I always did a little bit more than the job description required. And people noticed. So, I was the first person people

Code Name	Short Definition	Long Definition	Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria	Exemplar Quotation
		doing more than required, being indispensable, producing results that cannot be ignored, as a conscious strategy for overcoming structural barriers.	performance as leverage.	or advancement dimension.	thought of when opportunities came.'
Principled Framing	Reframing institutional interests to secure buy-in	Participant describes reframing their institutional priorities or advocacy in terms that appeal to decision-makers' interests, values, or constituencies, not as compromise but as a strategic tool for achieving equity goals.	Adjusting how a message is framed to get access without changing the substance of the goal; translating equity priorities into language that connects with resistant audiences.	Compromising on the substance of equity goals; genuinely assimilating to institutional values at the expense of original purpose.	Rome: 'We have tailored our story. Where everybody knows we're an HBCU, very few people knew we were a land grant. And so now you talk about the institution in a way that people can connect to.'
Solidarity Networks	Peer networks of Black women leaders as collective resource	Participant describes deliberately cultivating or participating in networks of Black women leaders, at the peer level, as a resource for collective problem-solving, mutual advocacy, information-sharing, and emotional support.	Group chats; cohorts of Black women presidents or senior leaders; sorority connections in professional contexts; explicit community of practice among Black women leaders.	Individual friendship or mentorship without the collective, strategic dimension.	Rome: 'I have a network of Black women who are in higher education that I could call at a moment\'s notice... a group thread that has 90% of the African-American female presidents of HBCUs.'
Mentoring Forward	Investing in the next generation of Black women leaders	Participant describes deliberate investment in the development, advancement, or encouragement of younger Black women as a form of leadership purpose, resistance, and legacy.	Formal or informal mentoring of Black women; advocating for Black women candidates; saying yes to mentoring requests; feeling accountable to the pipeline.	General professional generosity unconnected to race or gender identity.	Rome: 'I made a promise to myself many years ago that I will always say yes [to mentoring requests] because people said yes to me... it's just another one of us, another somebody.'

Code Name	Short Definition	Long Definition	Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria	Exemplar Quotation
Personal Frameworks for Resilience	Explicit organizing principles used to navigate adversity	Participant describes using specific, named personal or professional frameworks, principles, mantras, or organizing heuristics, to sustain their leadership effectiveness and resilience through structural adversity.	Named frameworks; organized principles for leadership or survival; explicit articulation of what sustains them.	General references to positivity or motivation without an explicit organizing framework.	Yokohama: 'I live by the Three C\'s, Communication, Cooperation, and the Five P\'s: Prayer, Purpose, Perseverance, Persistence, and Presence. I use those words every day in my workday.'
Strategic Exit	Departure as intentional act of self-preservation	Participant describes the decision to leave an institutional role not as failure or defeat but as a deliberate, strategic act of self-preservation, a form of resilience that prioritizes well-being and dignity over institutional endurance.	Describing exit as a choice; framing departure in terms of self-preservation, safety, or refusing to accept less than one deserves.	Exits driven by external factors (layoffs, family relocation) without agency dimension; departures described as unwanted losses.	Madrid: 'Resilience is not always staying. Sometimes resilience is knowing what you deserve and refusing to accept less. I chose to leave. That was the most strategic thing I could have done.'
Saying Yes to Growth	Accepting stretch opportunities despite uncertainty	Participant describes a pattern of accepting roles, assignments, or responsibilities that stretched beyond their comfort zone or initial career plan, often at others' encouragement, as a key mechanism of advancement.	Saying yes to director roles when asked; accepting interim positions; doing more than the job description; responding to others' confidence before feeling self-confident.	Strategic risk-taking in search of personal advancement without the 'being asked' or growth-stretch dimension.	Rome: 'yes to something that pushes you and stretches you a little bit beyond whatever boundaries you've set... I said yes because someone I respected thought I could do a good job and I wanted to live up to that.'

Focused Coding Summary: Categories, Codes, and Themes

Category	Open Codes Consolidated	Theme
Structural Career Barriers	Structural Exclusion; Concrete Ceiling; Title Without Authority; Promotion Opacity; Search Manipulation; Credential Discounting	Theme 1
Institutional Resistance and Access	Intra-Institutional Resistance; Access Deficit	Theme 1
Intersectional Bias and Dual Marginalization	Intersectional Labeling; Double Standard in Evaluation; Communication Tax; Intersectional Evaluation Lens; Name-Based Bias	Theme 2
Racialized Gendered Harm	Emotional Labor Inversion; Physical Presentation Tax	Theme 2
Professional Isolation and Singularity	Singularity / Being the Only; Professional Isolation; Singularity Adaptation Cost	Theme 3
Relational and Network Dynamics	Mentorship Gap; Relational Unsafety; Outsider-Within Dynamic; Cross-Racial Mentorship; Intra-Community Complexity	Theme 3
Tokenism and Structural Visibility	Symbolic Elevation; Hypervisibility / Invisibility Paradox; Best Supporting Actor; First and Only Milestone Burden	Theme 4
Representational Burden	Representational Labor; Constant Scrutiny; Racialized Impostor Syndrome	Theme 4
Strategic Navigation and Agency	Village Building; Strategic Visibility Management; Excellence as Strategy; Principled Framing; Saying Yes to Growth	Theme 5
Community, Solidarity, and Forward Investment	Faith and Spiritual Anchoring; Solidarity Networks; Mentoring Forward; Personal Frameworks for Resilience	Theme 5
Strategic Self-Preservation	Strategic Exit	Theme 5