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# The Lack of African American Women CEOs in Corporate America: A Qualitative Phenomenological Study

Rosalind D. Sawyer  
*Walden University*

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# Walden University

College of Management and Technology

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Rosalind Sawyer

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Walden University  
2017

Abstract

The Lack of African American Women CEOs in Corporate America: A Qualitative

Phenomenological Study

by

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MA, University of Phoenix, 2007

BS, University of Phoenix, 2005

Dissertation Submitted in Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy  
Organizational Leadership and Change

Walden University

August 2017

## Abstract

While the number of African American women filling executive level positions in Fortune 500 companies in America has improved, there is still a need for significant improvements in increasing their access to corporate chief executive officer (CEO) positions. African American women occupy only 11.7% of the board seats, and their representation as CEOs has steadily declined. Throughout the history of Fortune 500 companies, there have been only 14 African American men with CEO titles. As of January 2017, there are no African American women CEOs. The purpose of this phenomenology study was to examine the lived experiences and perceptions of 15 African American women who aspire to be chief executive officers in corporate America. The experiences and perceptions of these women were examined to understand why there is a limited number of African American women CEOs despite their increase in executive level roles. The responses from 15 African American women revealed that the increased numbers of these women in the executive leadership level resulted from diversity initiatives that made it possible for these women to return to school, and provided a context in which organizational leaders could recognize their talent. The organizations' use of diversity initiatives contributed to practices that legally allow them to minimize the number of minorities they hire at the executive level. The theoretical framework included elements from critical theory, critical race theory, and black feminist theory. The increased representation of these women at the executive level contributes to positive social change because the information adds to the existing literature on the lack of African American women CEOs in corporate America and may provide knowledge that will guide other women pursuing this role.

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## Dedication

In loving memory of my mother Frances Gale Hines and my brother Harold Richard Sawyer, Jr. I would like to also dedicate this study to my children and grandchildren. Thank you for your continued support and understanding throughout my academic pursuits. A special thank you to my aunt, Dr. Joan White for her never ending prayers and words of encouragement while I completed this study, for understanding the sacrifices I had to make as a mother, and for her ears when things became difficult. I love you and thank you all for believing in me.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

### **Introduction**

In spite of the efforts organizations have made to hire more minorities and women through affirmative action and diversity programs, very few African American women advance to corporate boards and the chief executive officer level in Fortune 500 companies (Beckwith, Carter, & Peters, 2016; Catalyst, 2015). In 2013, the U.S. Employment Equal Opportunity Commission reported that the number of African American women chief executive officers (CEOs) in corporate environments had not surpassed 2%. Further, in 2015, the number of African American women in leadership positions at the executive level decreased slightly, from 1.49% to 1.2% (Catalyst, 2015). Although 27% of the women who obtained leadership positions at the executive level and on boards of directors were promoted within their organizations or changed companies, 50% remained in the same role or accepted lateral moves, or transitioned out of the organization on their own or through position elimination, indicating that the percentage of African American women is still small when compared to white men and women in identical roles (Floyd, 2016). Nearly 40 years have passed since the implementation of diversity initiatives in corporate America. Still, African American women remain poorly represented in these roles, lingering at 1 to 1.1% of CEOs and members of boards of directors (Beckwith et al., 2016; Gant, 2015; Krawiec, Conley, & Broome, 2013; Zayra, 2016).

The low number of African American women who occupy top leadership positions (CEOs and members on boards of directors) is disappointing in light of

projections by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS, 2013) that indicated the number of African American women in top executive positions would increase by 6% from 2014 through 2024. However, in 2016, the BLS reported that, of 343,400 CEO positions, there were presently two African American women CEOs on the Fortune 500 list, with one announcing her departure at the end of 2016 and the other in January 2017 (Zarya, 2016). The Center for Talent Innovation, a non-profit organization that supports diversity indicated that, although they were more inclined than women of other groups to pursue leadership roles at higher levels, African American women remain practically invisible on corporate boards (Hewlett & Wingfield, 2015; Purdie-Vaughn, 2015; Zweigenhaft, 2013). In comparison to Caucasian women, women of color endure the most persistent barriers to senior-level leadership positions and are under-represented in senior-level positions in spite of their greater aspirations for becoming top executives (“Mentor,” 2016; “Women Matter,” 2017).

While previous research reports that they are qualified and prepared to take on the commitments associated with the role of CEO, because of various barriers related to racism and sexism, African American women have become discouraged with the difficulties they encounter in organizations and are losing their desire to pursue this role. Researchers have recommended that specific focus be given to the number of African American women who pursue and occupy positions at this level in corporate America (Rhode & Packel, 2014). Overall, the lack of women—and especially African American women—in executive level positions limits organizations’ access to the diverse perspectives that contributes to the resourcefulness and originality of these groups

(Llopis, 2012). There is a need for imagination and innovation when marketing to fast-growing populations, and without these critical skills, organizations fall behind in global competition (Llopis, 2012). Researchers have shown that, for strategic and operational purposes, organizations wanting to compete in global environments must include more minorities and women in CEO positions (Llopis, 2012). The hiring or promoting of African American women into CEO positions because of their race or sex was not the aim in this study. Instead, my goal was to raise awareness of what African American women face as they pursue top leadership positions, and what they feel contributed to their making little to no progress in fulfilling their goals. My examination of African American women's perceptions regarding their lived experiences while in pursuit of CEO positions in corporate America adds to the existing literature on the lack of African American women CEOs in corporate America and may provide knowledge that benefits and guides other women pursuing this role.

### **Background**

While women have made impressive progress in obtaining some executive-level positions in corporate America, African American women occupy only 11.7% of the board seats, and their representation as CEOs has steadily declined (Catalyst, 2016; Rosette & Livingston, 2012). Giovanni (2010) indicated that, out of 10,092 corporate officers in 2009, African American women held just 1.1% of those positions, filling only 106 roles at the corporate executive level. However, Fondon (2009) also reported that, while the number of African American women promoted into executive level roles was higher than it has ever been when compared to other ethnic groups (i.e., Latinos and



Asians Americans), African American women were at the bottom of ethnic organizational ladders in Fortune 500 companies. African American women were the least likely to occupy executive level roles (e.g., directors, senior directors, vice presidents, and presidents) and this exclusion has affected their access to opportunities for growth and development in preparation to assume CEO roles (Fondon, 2009). Researchers have suggested that qualified African American women in the U.S. workforce encounter barriers that negatively affect their career progression into executive level positions, which also means that advancing into CEO roles is affected as well (Durr & Harvey-Wingfield, 2011; Rhode & Packel, 2014; Rose & Bielby, 2011). These barriers include racial bias, gender bias, negative stereotyping, gender and ethnic dissimilarities compared to those in positions of power, the lack of organizational commitment, and lack of support from those in top leadership positions (Gunn, 2005; Scales, 2010). These barriers correspond to the same societal and structural barriers described as the *glass ceiling* phenomenon.

As reported by the U.S. Department of Labor's Federal Glass Ceiling Commission (1995), organizations cannot control societal barriers, which include supply (education and attainment) and differences (mindful and oblivious categorizing, bias, and prejudice related to sex, ethnic group, and culture). Hite (2006) found that, because they fit into both of the identified marginalized groups (race and sex), African American women are particularly subject to the numerous barriers associated with the glass ceiling. Also, the percentage of African American women in CEO positions indicates that categorized sections of the glass ceiling still exist in organizations (Collins, 2009). In

their 2007 study, Peterson, Philpot, and O'Shaughnessy reported that the professional backgrounds of African Americans, in general, made them just as experienced as their Caucasian colleagues.

Conversely, some researchers do not believe that the near absence of African American women in CEO positions results from the effects of the glass ceiling, a lack of professional development, limited organizational support from key members and their practices, and stereotyping (Farrow, 2008; Jackson, O'Callaghan & Adserias, 2014; Kay & Gorman, 2012; Purdie-Vaughn, 2015; Zeng, 2009). Zeng (2009) reported that the increase of African American women in managerial positions disputes the glass ceiling metaphor. However, the increase in the number of African American women in executive-level roles only shows that professional hurdles impede their climb up the corporate ladder and keep them underrepresented in CEO positions, revealing that organizational leaders manage when and if available executive-level positions become accessible to people of color who possess the proper experience, skills, and background (Jackson et al., 2014). The increase in the number of African American women in executive-level roles reveals that they have the proper experience, background, and ability to cross professional hurdles impeding their climbing of the corporate ladder; yet, they are still underrepresented in CEO positions.

After reviewing 210 articles on the issue of underrepresentation of African American women in CEO roles in Fortune 500 companies, I determined that a gap exists in the academic literature regarding what has contributed to their increase in executive-level positions over the last 10 years (Alliance for Board Diversity, 2011; Catalyst, 2013).

I further determined that an examination of the lived experiences of African American women aspiring to CEO positions could fill in the gap regarding the reasons for their increased numbers at the executive-level over the last 10 years. At the same time, I asked the question as to why African American women remain underrepresented among the nation's CEOs. Information obtained from African American women aspiring to CEO positions may assist other women in overcoming organizational barriers to achieve their professional goals.

### **Problem Statement**

While the number of African American women filling executive-level positions in Fortune 500 companies has increased, there remains a need for a significant increase in access to CEO positions (Rosette & Livingston, 2012). For example, in 2014, women of color held a mere 11.9% of managerial positions and 3.2% of board seats (Catalyst, 2012; Warner, 2014). The Alliance for Board Diversity, as reported by Dingle (2013), indicated that African American women held just 1.9% of seats on corporate boards in Fortune 500 companies, compared to 5.7 % or 5.5% of seats held by African American men and 74.5% to 95% of seats held by Caucasian men. African Americans constituted the only group that experienced a decline in board seat representation of Fortune 500 companies. Throughout the history of Fortune 500 companies, there have been only 14 African American men with CEO titles and, as of January 2017, there are no African American women CEOs (Zarya, 2017). From 2010 through 2012, there were 56 openings on boards of directors and the majority of them went to Caucasian women (Dingles, 2013; Rhode &

Packel, 2014). What's more, the number of African Americans in CEO positions peaked at seven in 2007; by 2015, that number had decreased to five (Wallace, 2015).

Revealed in the demographic data is an imbalance in the proportion of working African American women in positions as CEOs. Historical barriers encountered by African American women aspiring to top corporate leadership positions include the following:

- Organizational culture.
- Gender stereotypes.
- Subtle racism.
- Discrimination.
- The lack of professional networks and mentors.
- Family commitments.
- Gender and ethnic dissimilarities with those in positions of power.
- The lack of organizational commitment and support of family, friends and community (Kiaye & Maniraj, 2013; Linnabery, Stuhlmacher, & Towler, 2014; Scales, 2010; Skaggs, Stainback, & Duncan, 2012; Wilson, 2014).

In corporate America, African American women encounter everyday sociocultural realities that pertain to their race, gender, and social class in predominantly white organizations (Davis & Maldonado, 2015). As Sanchez-Hucles and Davis (2010) notes, African American women encounter thicker barriers posed by combinations of racism and sexism. The Executive Leadership Council indicated that, of the more than 30,000 projected executive-level positions in Fortune 500 companies, the percentage of expected

positions expected to be filled by African American men and women was just 3.2%, or less than 800 African American men and women (Ward, 2012). Furthermore, in the United States, there were only six African American CEOs in 2012, and Ursula Barnes and Rosalind Brewer were the only two African American women at the CEO level (Desmond-Harris, 2012). The lack of skilled and experienced African Americans in the usual CEO recruiting grounds—middle and upper management—is not what is keeping African Americans from reaching top-level leadership positions. Research indicates that African American women do extremely well in middle management positions. However, because they are not guaranteed promotions into positions at the executive leadership level, this is usually the height of their career and an additional barrier when pursuing this role (Davis & Maldonado, 2015). The U.S. Department of Labor Federal Glass Ceiling Commission (1995) reported that organizations could not control societal barriers that include supply barriers (education and attainment) and barriers related to differences (mindful and oblivious categorizing, bias, and prejudice related to sex, ethnic group, and culture). African American women aspiring leadership roles at the senior-level are particularly likely to encounter these societal and internal barriers characterized by the glass ceiling. Despite the fact that the number of African American women promoted into executive level roles over the past few years was higher than it has ever been (when compared to women of other ethnic groups), African American women still represented only 1% of the CEOs on organizational ladders in Fortune 500 companies (Elmer, 2015).

Not all researchers have reported internal structural and societal barriers as contributing to African American women not progressing to CEO roles (Chin, 2013;

Cooper, 2016; Ibarra & Petriglieri, 2016; Ospina et al., 2012). However, Bowles (2012) indicated that the lack of African American women CEOs was a reality when employed in corporate America regardless of their education, qualifications, and skills. The perception is that corporate America is not a fair workplace for most African American women. In corporate America, not all African American women in mid- to upper-managerial roles want to advance to CEO positions. The particular problem of this study is that, in spite of reported increases in the number of women in executive level roles, the underrepresentation of African American women at the CEO level in corporate America persists (Elmer, 2015). Even now, the low representation of African American women in executive-level roles stems from barriers associated with discrimination that women encounter on a universal level (Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010).

Determining if obstacles related to discrimination influence African American women's decision to pursue CEO positions is not an easy undertaking (Davis & Maldonado, 2015). As they progress in their careers, the decisions that African American women make regarding their career trajectories are guided by their lived experiences; the nature of these lived experiences, ultimately, determine whether or not an African American woman pursues positions at higher levels in an organization (Davis, 2012). A gap in the academic literature exists regarding what factors have contributed to the increase in the number of African American women in executive-level positions over the last 10 years, and researchers have indicated the need for more qualitative studies on African American women's lived experiences when pursuing CEO roles (Bowles, 2012; Catalyst, 2013; Davis, 2012; Hancock, 2012).

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to examine the lived experiences of African American women who aspire to CEO roles in order to obtain a better understanding of why there continues to be a limited number of African American women in CEO roles in the United States. Through study, I sought to understand what African American women experienced in corporate environments as they progressed to leadership levels. Despite the fact that women of color represent a growing and important resource in organizations, African American women CEOs are rare in corporate America (Catalyst, 2015). Seventy-five percent of corporate executives agree that having minorities in leadership positions at the executive level enables innovation and better serves diverse customers. The social statuses of African American women and society's perception of what it means to be a CEO undermine the potential for more diverse board representation in organizations that include them (Eagly, 2012; Rosette & Livingston, 2012). Women pursuing CEO roles are usually just as qualified, skilled, and capable as men; still, organizations increased representation of all women regardless of race on corporate boards appear to occur by force, which shows that women are not given the same access to these opportunities as men (Elsesser, 2015). This research study adds to existing academic literature on the lack of African American Women CEOs in corporate America, and the findings may provide organizations with information for the recruitment and retention of women, especially African American women at the CEO level in Fortune 500 companies.

## Research Questions

The central research question in this phenomenological study focused on the perceptions of African American women who aspire to CEO positions regarding why African American women continue to be underrepresented in CEO positions. I asked: What are the lived experiences of African American women aspiring to CEO positions in Fortune 500 companies? I designed four sub-questions to examine perceptions about African American women's increased presence in positions such as directors, senior directors, vice presidents, and senior vice presidents in corporate America, despite their decrease at the chief executive officer level.

Sub-questions:

1. What contributed to the increase of African American women in positions such as directors, senior directors, vice presidents, and senior vice presidents in corporate America?
2. How did these factors contribute to the increase of African American women in director, senior director, vice president, and senior vice president roles in corporate America?
3. What apparent factors play a part in the lack of African American women in CEO positions in Fortune 500 companies, a part of corporate America?
4. Describe how these factors play a role in the lack of African American women in CEO positions.



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

The theoretical framework of this study consists of elements from critical theory, critical race theory, and black feminist theory. Critical theory addresses issues associated with power, justice, race, class, gender, education, and organizations (Maxwell, 2013). Black feminism offers an assessment of social relations, sex, and advancement of African American women's rights, interests, and opportunities (Thompson & Carter, 2013). Black feminist theory is addressed to African American women's distinct circumstances and the structures and organizations that surrounded those circumstances (Maxwell, 2013). The selected theories provided me theoretical and critical direction as well as a practical orientation in hands-on, shared, change-oriented, and reliable methods of inquiry (Patton, 2014). Although they face common challenges as a group, African American women also claim individual experiences regarding what it means to be an African American woman (Grissette-Banks, 2014). In organizations, what many African American women experience when pursuing advancement opportunities in leadership at the senior level is persistently hidden behind an array of common beliefs about their intelligence, work habits, and sexuality (Grissette-Banks, 2014). Critical race theory can be used to shed light on the lived experiences of African American women pursuing CEO roles in Fortune 500 companies. African American women view the world from the perspective of a categorized group that experiences racism, discrimination, and marginalization; this theory furnishes a framework for contextualizing the epistemology (Bernal, 2013; Ladson-Billings, 2014). Given African American women's lived experiences in organizations, critical race theory makes clear the number of ways in which African

American women struggle under the double-minority status of race (Black) and gender (woman), and can be used to show how this struggle impacts their career paths in organizations (Hancock, 2013). Afrocentric epistemology helps African American women manage institutional racial discrimination, sexism, and prejudice that remain a part of their common experience (Jean-Marie, 2013). My use of critical race theory in this qualitative study offered an alternative explanation for recent opportunities made available to African American women in mid- to upper-managerial positions in Fortune 500 companies.

### **Nature of the Study**

In this study, I used a qualitative research method with a phenomenological research design. I selected a qualitative research method to explore African American women's perceptions regarding their aspirations to rise to the level of CEO, including perceptions regarding African American women's underrepresentation in these roles and the recurring challenges that they encountered when moving up the corporate ladder in organizations. I also examined the possibility of new barriers within organizations that limit opportunities for African American women to advance. My selection of a phenomenological research method and design, enabled me to gain insight regarding the lived experiences of African American women who aspire to executive-level positions in corporate America. Specifically, phenomenological research strategies enabled me to recognize and capture the essence of the human experiences regarding the target phenomenon (see Davis & Maldonado, 2015).

Although the number of African American women occupying executive-level positions has increased, African American women are still underrepresented at the CEO level. The findings of this study fill in the gaps regarding the reasons for the increase of African American women at the executive-leadership level and the reasons why there are still so few African American women at the CEO level in Fortune 500 companies. In addition, the findings of this study revealed barriers African American women confront to reach the CEO level in Fortune 500 companies including race, sex, class, lack of organizational support, and stereotypes. These findings indicate that African American women still experience racism, sexism, and classism when climbing the corporate ladder despite their qualifications and skills. Having more women, especially African American women, in positions as CEOs in the largest organizations in the United States can provide role models and mentors who can encourage other women who aspire to CEO positions to pursue these roles.

### **Operational Definitions**

I have used the following key terms throughout the study.

*Affirmative action:* Affirmative action provides precedence to underrepresented ethnic groups in specific sectors of society, including workplaces and educational institutions (Nittle, n.d.).

*African American women/Black women:* Women of African or Black origin; these terms are used interchangeably.

*Black feminist theory:* Black feminist theory contains observations and interpretations about African American womanhood that describe and explain the experience of oppression along with other common themes (Collins, 2013).

*Caucasian:* An Anglo-Saxon person of Northern European descent; the term “White” has been used interchangeably with Caucasian (Caucasian, Merriam-Webster).

*Chief executive officer (CEO):* The highest-ranking executive manager in an organization who is in charge of the entire organization (Heathfield, n.d.).

*Concrete ceiling:* The “concrete ceiling” refers barriers that make advancing into upper-level leadership positions in organizations harder for African American women. Barriers associated with the “concrete ceiling” include damaging race-related stereotypes, undermining others’ integrity and power, scarcity in organizational backing, dual outsider status, and lack of access to informal networks (Smith, Caputi, & Crittenden, 2012).

*Epistemology:* Refers to systems of information that are centered on people’s lived experiences (Bernal, 2013; Harding, 1987; Jean-Marie, Williams, & Sherman, 2009; Ladson-Billing, 2000).

*Executive level:* Executive levels consist of the positions that make up U.S. corporations. These positions include owner, chairperson, president, CEO, Chief Operating Officer (COO), Chief Information Officer (CIO), Chief Financial Officer (CFO), senior vice president, vice president, treasurer, and organization director (Wise-Wright & Zajicek, 2006).

*Fortune 500 companies:* Top ranked organizations that Fortune magazine lists according to sales, assets, earnings, and capitalization. According to a report released by

the Partnership for a New American Economy in 2011, Fortune 500 companies help the economy.

*Glass ceiling*: Refers to hurdles that keep minorities, including Black women, from advancing into upper-level managerial positions (Childress, 2007).

*Phenomenology*: A qualitative research design used by researchers to capture the real meaning of human experiences surrounding an identified phenomenon (Moustakes, 1994).

*Second-generation gender bias*: Refers to policies or institutional structures that appear neutral but in reality favor men and discriminate against women. This term originates from sex stereotypes, traditional beliefs of men and women, what society believes the people want, and how they conduct themselves and who they are (Ibarra, Ely, & Kolb, 2013).

*Sociocultural*: relate to or involve a combination of social and cultural factors such as race, gender, and class when researching authoritative figures in organizations along with additional systems where control is used to dominate (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999).

### **Assumptions**

My first assumption was that African American women working in Fortune 500 companies have the required experience and were accessible and open to participating in this research study. Participants' accessibility and openness was necessary for me to be able to acknowledge, record, and interpret participants' lived experiences along with their perceptions of these experiences (see Moustakes 1994). My second assumption was that

African American women's experiences and perspectives would recount the phenomenon and that these descriptions would vary in depth and understanding. My third assumption was that members of the dominant culture groups receive more promotions and advancement opportunities than African American women, whose opportunities are limited (see Davis & Maldonado, 2015; Stewart, 2016). The literature showed that, due to racial and gender bias, minorities and women are overlooked regarding promotional opportunities (Schulz & Enslin, 2014). My fourth assumption was that negative stereotypes and perceptions about African American women's abilities to lead still exist in many Fortune 500 companies (Davis, 2012).

### **Scope**

The goal of this phenomenological research study was to examine the lived experiences of African American women who aspire to CEO positions in Fortune 500 companies. In interviews, African American women described their lived experiences in mid- to upper-managerial positions. Generously respecting African American women pursuing CEO positions, my intent was not to answer or to uncover all of the organizational barriers that African American women encountered in their pursuit of CEO positions. Instead, my intent was to obtain a better understanding of the barriers that deny African American women opportunities to become CEOs, but that are apparently irrelevant in respect to increasing their presence at the executive leadership level.

### **Delimitations**

Delimitations of the study included participants meeting specific criteria, namely that they were African American women in line for promotion to a chief executive

position or aspired to become a CEO. An objective of qualitative researchers is to select a small sample of participants who can illuminate the phenomenon under investigation (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2013). Bearing in mind that the findings of this study resist generalization to other populations and contexts, I focused on the perspective of African American women aspiring to CEO positions (see Miles et al., 2013). Because of the paucity of research regarding the topic of African American women in CEO positions, future studies on African American women who aspire to CEO positions in Fortune 500 companies can focus on how African American women CEOs can benefit corporate America (Berrey, 2014; Davis, 2012).

### **Limitations**

Limitations to this phenomenological research study included a limited number of African American women who were purposefully selected to participate in the study. With purposeful sampling, the researcher's judgement is vulnerable to errors, there is a low level of reliability and a high level of bias. Further the research findings are not generalizable (Dudovskiy, 2016). Another limitation of this study was the small sampling size ( $n = 15$ ) of professional African American women in mid- to upper-managerial-level roles. African American women in positions as managers, senior managers, associate directors, directors, and senior directors who aspire to CEO positions were the only ones I solicited to participate in this study, and thus, the results represent the lived experiences of them as group. In this study, I relied on the similarities and differences of participant responses as a basis for understanding the lived experiences of the African American women pursuing CEO positions. I served as the principal instrument for data collection

and analysis, which constitutes a limitation because of possible bias. However, I was as objective as possible when collecting and analyzing the data and the results, and I remained impartial and focused solely on the responses of the participants and the phenomenon to acquire an understanding of their lived experiences while pursuing CEO roles.

### **Significance**

The study was significant for several reasons. First, the study brought awareness to the life experiences that failed to give African American women knowledge and skills needed to maneuver through complex social and cultural environments. Another reason this study is significant was that, in an intensifying and increasingly global workplace, the lack of African American women in CEO roles may interfere with the retention of younger and talented women, particularly African American women. Organizations with few or no African American women in CEO roles have limited their access to talented and diverse leadership (Eagly, 2012).

### **Summary**

In Chapter 1 I summarized the problem of access and opportunities for African American women at the executive and CEO level, despite the efforts of Affirmative Action, diversity programs, and attempts made to include various races and sexes in the top levels of corporate leadership. Although women have made undeniable progress in obtaining positions as associate directors, directors, senior directors, vice presidents, presidents in corporate America, the number of African American women in CEO positions has continued to decline (Rosette & Livingston, 2012). In 2012, there were only



six African American CEOs in the United States, and only two of them were African American women (Desmond-Harris, 2012). African American women's lived professional, personal, and societal experiences determine their decisions regarding whether to pursue executive and CEO positions in corporate America (Davis 2012). Researchers have shown that African American women in CEO roles hovered around 1% at the top of organizational pyramids and boardrooms (Baker, 2012). This percentage is strikingly low when taking into account that 75% of corporate executives agree that minorities in executive and CEO-level positions promote innovation and enhance outreach to their increasingly diverse consumer base (Davis, 2012; Mahadeo, Soobaroyen, & Hanuman, 2012).

Key theories I identified and associated with African American women aspiring to CEO positions in corporate America include critical theory, critical race theory, black feminism, and black feminist theory. Critical theory relates to concerns associated with power, justice, race, class, gender, education, and other social institutions and cultural dynamics (Minkler, 2012). I used critical race theory in this qualitative study to focus on how race and gender impacted the advancement of African American women in organizations throughout phases of the investigated phenomenon (see Ormston, Spencer, Barnard, & Snape, 2014). Specifically, I examined the lived experiences of African American women aspiring to a CEO position in a Fortune 500 company.

This study contributes to existing research by showing that race, gender, and the lack of organizational commitment and support from those in top leadership positions continue to hinder the advancement of African American women in executive-level

positions. In this study on the lack of African American women CEOs in Fortune 500 companies, I also gathered participants' perceptions as to why they remain underrepresented in CEO positions, especially since researchers have noted that this was the height of their career. This study is important because organizations with few or no African American women in CEO roles limit their access to talented and diverse leadership. In Chapter 2, I provide a review of the literature and the theoretical framework, and I explore the gap in the literature regarding African American women and the barriers they encounter while pursuing top executive roles while accounting for a recent decline in African American women who occupy CEO positions (Catalyst, 2013).

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### **Introduction**

Although recent years have seen a greater number of African American women filling executive-level positions in Fortune 500 companies, the need to increase the opportunities for members of this group still exists in corporate America (Catalyst, 2015; Rosette & Livingston, 2012). The U.S. BLS (2013) and Catalyst (2012) reported a shortage of African American women in these highest executive-level roles and found causes for this disparity to be similar to those that produce the glass ceiling inhibiting the advancement of women generally to uppermost management. The simultaneous presence of both racial and gender disparity has strongly affected the number of African American women acquiring executive and CEO positions in corporate America. In this study, I examined the lived experiences and perceptions of African American women who aspire to CEO positions in corporate America. Participants' observations provided me a frame for understanding why there continues to be a limited number of African American women CEOs despite an increased presence at the executive level more broadly. My aim was to augment the existing literature documenting the scarcity of African American women CEOs by providing insight into the factors that have contributed to an increase in their obtaining executive-level positions within the last 10 years as well as those factors that continue to keep African American women underrepresented at the CEO level.

Only 2.2% of CEO positions in America are held by women, and women comprise only 15% of corporate officers (Catalyst, 2012). Members of ethnic minorities hold only 3% of Fortune 500 director positions, and in 2012 only three women of color

were CEOs (Catalyst, 2012). African American women comprise no more than 5.1% of managerial, professional, and related occupations (BLS, 2013). Women comprise 48.8% of the private sector workforce but are vastly underrepresented at the executive level (EEOC, 2011). Reasons for this discrepancy can include social and cultural norms and intentional discrimination (Bertrand, Black, Jensen, & Lleras-Muney, 2014). Bowleg (2012) reported that African American women encounter roadblocks stemming from sociocultural narratives about race and gender in organizations that are predominantly White. Women, as a group encounter, barriers due to sexism; African American women face the even greater barriers posed by the combination of both racism and sexism (Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010).

The lived experiences of African American women who aspire to chief executive level positions in corporate America have been the topic of several research studies (Byrd, 2012; Davis, 2012; Jean-Marie, 2013; Rhode, 2016). However, a gap in the literature remains concerning the gains African American women have made in recent years in advancing to the executive level (Catalyst, 2013). How organizations contributed to African American women's recent success in climbing the corporate ladder remains unknown. In this chapter, I provide an overview of the literature review strategy I employed, and highlight the theoretical frameworks of the study. Throughout the chapter, I document previous insights into the problematic scarcity of African American women CEOs and the barriers and challenges facing African American women who aspire to join their ranks.

### **Literature Search Strategy**

The primary databases I used to obtain relevant literature were ProQuest, EBSCOhost, ABI/INFORM Complete, ScienceDirect, SAGE Premier, Business Source Complete, PsycNET, Emerald, and Google Scholar. For the literature review, I searched numerous titles and reviewed multiple journal articles, and research documents. During the literature review process, I retrieved 210 documents, 161 of which were articles from the primary literature. The theoretical framework portion of the literature review included title searches for keywords including *critical theory*, *critical race theory*, *black feminism*, and *black feminist theory*. Publication years for the documents used in this section ranged from 1964 to 2016.

I conducted an additional search for articles relevant to the historical overview using EBSCOhost and ProQuest as primary databases. The historical overview section consisted of 33 peer-reviewed journal articles that I retrieved using search keywords such as *race*, *gender*, *class*, *stereotyping*, and *organizational processes and procedures*. Years of publication for these historical documents were all before 2012.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework of this study consisted of elements from critical theory, critical race theory, black feminism, and black feminist theory. Researchers have used these theoretical frameworks to address the issue of the underrepresentation of African American women in executive and CEO roles in corporate America. Byrd (2012) applied the critical theory, critical race theory, black feminism, and black feminist theory to African American women employed in organizations dominated by Caucasians (Byrd,

2012). Creswell (2013) utilized methods that examined ascendance, subjugation, isolation, and struggles of African American women within organizations, universities, and society in the hope of positive social change. Critical theory is a highly influential framework that focuses on ways in which inequality influences an individual's experiences and perceptions of the world (Alvesson & Willmott, 2012). Theorists have used critical race theory and black feminist theory to explain the leadership experiences of African American women in a context of race, sex, and social class (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012).

### **Critical Theory**

The foundation of critical theory lies in writings of E.E. Gantt, G.W.F. Hegel and Karl Marx (Oakley, 2015). Critical theory emerged from a loosely affiliated group of quasi-Marxist philosophers associated with the Frankfurt School of Social Research, which was founded in 1923 (Montgomery & Chirot, 2015). Scholars such as Herbert Marcuse, Theodor W. Adorno, Max Horkheimer, and Jurgen Habermas were affiliates of the Frankfurt School's first and second generation of critical theorists (Collin & Pedersen, 2015). The term critical theory represented the approach used by scholars in their study of society from 1930 to 1970 (Boyd & Crawford, 2012).

Critical theory defined an alternative to positivism and the approaches taken by technical experts to social science and traditional philosophies (Creswell, 2012). With the critical theory ideas interpreted rationality as a form of self-reflective, activities that focus on the disconnection of truth and the concept of the imaginable, and influential reasoning (Agger, 2014). Critical theory was not affiliated with traditional research;

instead it attempted to describe the specific constraints of those methods (Marshall & Rossman, 2014). Concerned with transformation, critical theory has also been known as the third paradigm of liberalism and communitarianism (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).

Critical theory envisions the emancipation of the individual and a free and rational society (Allmer, 2015). Critical theory is one of the most influential frameworks for addressing the ways in which inequality and subjugation influence individual or group encounters with, and perception of, the world (Patton, 2014). Critical theorists concern themselves with the interactions of social institutions, race, gender, class, economics, discrimination, potency, edification, and religions (Patton, 2014). Critical theory advocates the upheaval of unjust societal practices and institutions in an attempt to create a more equitable society (Herring & Henderson, 2012). The central organizing concept of critical theory is power within the social context, and critical theorists document the erroneous perceptions and deceitful practices wielded by the upper class to control people of low status such as African American women (Herring & Henderson, 2012). African American women reached critical consciousness when they identified their needs, obstacles, and potential solutions to problems in light of new understandings about societal power (Herring & Henderson, 2012). Critical theory requires an examination of power relationships in society so as to benefit oppressed groups and provide opportunities for them to overcome societal and interpersonal oppression and inequity (Herring & Henderson, 2012).

The critical theory initially developed by the Frankfurt School emphasized epistemology, and reasoned assessment of society and cultures (Montgomery & Chirot,

2015). In response to disempowering experiences, the critical reflections of African American women has led to the transformational and unrestricted learning required for their emancipation and success (Cooper, 2016; Lane, 2014). African American women have navigated through and survived experiences that might have disempowered them, providing them with new-found knowledge and inspiration (Lane, 2014). In critical theory, critical thinking is recognized as an ability to identify, challenge, and transmute racism, classism, and economic inequities (Brookfield, 2014). Critical theory analyzes the policies and practices of dominant groups in organizations that maintained organizations' inequity while denying sympathy to underrepresented groups and nourishing cultures of silence (Brookfield, 2014). Within these organizations, these dominant groups may dishonestly disseminate the idea that present conditions of inequality are unavoidable, stifling dissent (Brookfield, 2014). Critical theory forces us to address suffering and work to eliminate inequality (Smart, 2013).

### **Critical Race Theory**

Civil-rights proponents and legal scholars such as Derrick Bell, Alan Freeman, and Richard Delgado came together and created critical race theory in response to the waning of the civil right movements (Barnes, 2015; Byrd, 2012; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Harris, 2012). Kimberle Crenshaw, Angela Harris, Charles Lawrence, Mari Matsuda, Patricia Williams, Neil Gotanda, Eric Yamamoto, Robert Williams, Kevin Johnson, Margaret Montoya, Juan Perea, and Francisco Valdes were also contributors to critical race theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Objectives of critical race theorists were to find out why equality under the law had not generally led to great improvements in the



lives of most African Americans and other minorities and why expectations for equality stemming from social integration with Caucasians seemingly have disappeared (Cho, Crenshaw, & McCall, 2013). Although the law mandated racial integration in workplaces of the United States, critical race theory revealed an imbalance of power remained in organizations (Nkomo & Hoobler, 2014). Critical race theory is a distinctive method that enabled researchers an ability to use narratives, autobiographies, and counter-stories to reveal experiences exclusive to African American women (Bernal, 2013).

Professional African American women have experienced racism, discrimination, and marginalization that have affected their views of the world (Byrd, 2012). Socio-cultural theoretical frameworks such as critical race theory are useful when studying the complexities that surround the experiences of African American women in predominantly White organizations (Davis, 2012). Critical race theory imputes that perceived differences in management and communication styles, levels of motivation and success, and performance capabilities hide the essential lines of prejudice, racial discrimination, dominance, and Caucasian privileges afflicting the world (Rocco, Bernier & Bowman, 2014). Critical race theorists insist that discrimination be recognized and that dominance, Caucasian privilege, and racial and sexual oppression are responsible for negative workforce behaviors (Rocco et al., 2014).

Racism has silenced members of minorities viewed as inferior and maintained existing conditions in organizations. Critical race theory acknowledges the necessity of policies like affirmative action and the recognition of the glass ceiling (Rocco et al., 2013). Critical race theory offers a framework for critiquing the White backlash against

affirmative action, the myth of a colorblind society, and the folly that characterizes the belief that advancement is based solely on an individual ability and achievement (Pompper, 2012). Critical race theory encourages organizations to take a progressive stance in recognizing how their culture has preserved current conditions of inequality (Rocco et al., 2013). The theory reveals ways in which societal and occupational segregation are directly connected to racism, and that awareness of race, ethnicity, and culture is an initial step toward equality (Pompper, 2012). Traditional theories, philosophies, and writings are challenged by critical race theory, which describes how African American women's experiences are affected by race, sex, and inferior status within society and bureaucracies (Marcuse, 2013).

Narratives about discrimination from the viewpoint of the African American women have described their fight for the end of racial suppression, while at the same time acknowledging that society constructs race (Thorius, Maxcy, Macey, & Cox, 2014). The awareness that African American women leaders have gained from their struggles within organizations and society have helped to expose existing inequities that reinforce the unlawful use of dominance (Byrd, 2012). Development of ideas coherent with critical race theory and which provide a theoretical framework for the acknowledgment and understanding of the connections associated with ethnicity, social status, sex, and storytelling/counter-storytelling is needed for African American women attempting to assert control in professional environments; this includes obtaining necessary self-knowledge (Cooper 2016). The lived experiences of African American women that have

obtained leadership positions in the public and private sectors were examined with the critical race theory and epistemology in the present study.

Critical race theory has illustrated the fact that organizations that adopt diversity ideologies and characterize themselves as advocates of racial and gender equity, often retain policies and practices that preserve racism through inequality in the chain of command (Hughey, 2014). Critical race theory provides a historical context for the origins of the White leader stereotype and the vesting of whiteness with value prior to the struggle for civil rights (Festekjian, Tram, Murray, Sy, & Huyn, 2014). People of color are perpetually damaged not only by racism itself but also the mistaken notion that racism has disappeared (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Critical race theory has looked into the same issues that the civil rights studies and ethnic studies have, including economics, history, groups, and analysis of self-interest (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Harris, 2012). European philosophers of the early sixties and seventies contributed to the critical race theory, and individuals such as Sojourner Truth, Martin Luther King, Jr., Fredrick Douglas, Antonio Gramsci, W.E.B. Du Bois, Jacques Derrida, and Cesar Chavez were contributors. Feminist perceptions of male ascendance were incorporated into critical race theory, and the theory and addressed historic wrongs that necessitated the civil rights movement (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). The theory recognized that dominant societies racialized various minority groups in response to fluctuating needs such as the labor market (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). The persistence of dominance without intimidation and cooperative rejection revealed itself with the critical race theory. Critical race theory

has been used to analyze the legal reasoning and main systematic inventions behind state laws that have perpetuated racism (Harris, 2012).

### **Black Feminism and Black Feminist Theory**

Caring is the framework of Black feminist theory and the foundation of African American women's epistemology that combines the past, society, and know-how with unlikeness, rhetoric, affection, and compassion; Black feminism opposes philosophies and political movements that advance White supremacy (Collins, 2013). The views that African American women have traditionally held about sexism and racism were challenged with Black feminism (Collins, 2013). Feminists in the 1970s were divided into liberal, radical, and socialist subgroups based on philosophical differences in the origins of women's inferior status and the tactics most likely to achieve emancipation (Ryan, 2013). Liberal feminists believed that social integration was the key to addressing the concerns of African American women (Alameen-Shavers, 2016). They believed that if all women had the same privileges as men in society, women of color and other ethnic groups would move up in society and join the mainstream of American feminists (Alameen-Shavers, 2016). However, feminists in support of the Marxist explanation of the country maintained that racial discrimination resulted from capitalism (Ryan, 2013). The experiences of women of color are marginalized in the writings of first-wave and second-wave feminist movements during the 70s and 80s (Patterson, 2012).

The Combahee River Collective is composed of several black feminists who elucidated the place of African American women in the political realm of feminism, taking their name in commemoration of Harriet Tubman's leadership during the

Combahee River raid of 1863 (Brah & Phoenix, 2013). The Combahee River Collective arose as an offshoot of the National Black Feminist Organization in 1974; their, objective was to obtain equality for African American women in society, politics, and the economy in opposition to the disparity that was based on race, sex, or social class (Brah & Phoenix, 2013). They believed in the organization of work that benefitted employees (Brah & Phoenix, 2013). Marginalization of African American women has taken various forms in the workplace, the growth of White feminism did not address the realities of women of color (Mullings, 2014). Black feminist theory perceived the sociological aspect of African American women in leadership positions in predominantly White organizations (Byrd, 2012).

Black Feminism demonstrated the emerging power of African American women as agents of knowledge and portrayed them as self-defined and self-reliant individuals that confronted race, gender, and class oppression (Collins, 2013). A fundamental paradigmatic shift fostered African American women's thoughts about oppression by grasping the concepts of ethnicity, sex, and social class as part of a connected organization of oppression (Collins, 2013). Black feminism addressed societal affiliation of dominance and opposition and ongoing epistemological debates in feminist theory associated with new forms of knowing revealed by subordinate groups (Collins, 2013). Traditionally, African American women responded to bad situations and circumstances emerging from historical oppression, and their gregarious activism consisted of hard work that transformed inequities in corporations, educational systems, and government agencies (Mullings, 2014). One of the main substructures of the Black feminist theory

was disempowerment in cognition of race, sex, and gregarious class; for African American women, disempowerment was the primary sentiment encountered (Byrd, 2012). African American women in leadership positions were viewed as experiencing two power challenges within Black feminist theory, a corrective dominion of power and a dominating authority of power (Byrd, 2012). When African American women are in leadership positions in an organization within the dominant culture, they can be disempowered, ostracized, and judged according to stereotyped images maintained by social network systems and practices (Byrd, 2012). Black feminist theory integrated and confirmed how race and sex connect to the experiences in African American women's lives, based upon a premise of shared mutual views and circumstances (Smith, 2013). The marginalization felt by African American women in leadership positions has been described as "outsider within status" in Black feminist theory (Bowleg, 2013).

Black feminism holds that sexism, racism, and classism are inextricably bonded together (Lane, 2014). Through the prism of Black feminism, the attainment of leadership roles by some African American women was a picture of perspicacious inferiority and powerlessness, very different from the view of the dominant culture (Lane, 2014). Through edification, political activism, group solidarity, and engagement on all levels, Black feminism achieved its goal of illuminating the institutionalized and invisible nature of oppressive forces (Boux, 2016). Sojourner Truth, who helped to develop Black feminist theory, was critical of White second wave feminists who perpetuated racism and other oppressive behaviors upon women of color (Patterson, 2012). White feminists exacerbated racial tensions by insisting that the primary causes of inequality were sex-

and gender-related, which placed African American women and other women of color in the untenable position, of putting sex and gender issues ahead of race differences, increasing tension with men in their communities (Patterson, 2012). Through the deconstruction of harmful stereotypes, Black feminist theory revealed ways in which African American women and other women of color continue to be the “racial other” and illustrated how subordination and oppression was formed by a matrix of race, gender, and class rooted in legacies of slavery and colonialism (Patterson, 2012).

### **Historical Overview**

African American women’s subordinate status with respect to Caucasian men in power has been marked (Collins, 2012). Although African American women fought against the various forms of oppression, for them being Black and female was reality. Unlike African American men, they could not escape female subordination (Collins, 2012). Subordinate status has greatly shaped the experiences of African American women (Collins, 2012). All too often, they find themselves on the less valued side of dichotomies such as African American/Caucasian, men/women, truths/views, themes/items, and reason/emotion. The ideas that Whites ruled Blacks, men dominated women, reason was superior to emotion in ascertained truth, facts superseded opinions when evaluating knowledge, and subjects ruled objects implied that interactions of power, subordination, and ranked connections interlocked with political economies of domination and subordination (Collins, 2012).

## **Race, Sex, and Class**

The “standpoint” of African American women has placed less emphasis on individual experiences within socially constructed groups than on the social conditions that construct them (Davis & Maldonado, 2015). The US Bureau of Labor Statistics (2013) reported that in 2009 only 59% of women were working in the labor force, and anticipated only a 9% increase by 2018. Although more African American women than ever before have earned college degrees and entered the workforce, there is a serious scarcity in the number of women of color reaching the executive level (Sepand, 2015). In 2013, women of color represented 36.3% of the female population, 18% of U.S. population, and one-third of the female workforce; nevertheless, two-thirds of Fortune 500 companies did not have a single woman of color on their boards of directors (Warner, 2014). Due to sexism, racism, and classism, African American women have experienced years of oppression, but despite this, they have endured the obstacles and surpassed many of their challenges (Branche, 2014).

African American women fought to eradicate the far-reaching effects of slavery and obtain equality (Brown, White-Johnson & Griffin-Fennell, 2013). Racism and sexism have been persistent for African American women, for they experienced a double and methodical prejudice and, for some, discrimination regarding class compounded their oppression (Brown, White-Johnson, & Griffin-Fennell, 2013). Terms such as triple jeopardy, multiple consciousness, and oppositional consciousness were used to describe simultaneous discrimination, chauvinism, and classism present whenever the statuses of African American women were conceptualized (Smith, 2013). Restifo, Roscigno, and



Qian (2013) studied discrimination in organizations and reported that it affected women's climb to upper-level leadership positions. They noted that African American women encountered severe discrimination, particularly when they pursued upper-level management roles.

During a time when African American women were deprived an education and endured overwhelming challenges as educators, they fought to find and fill their place in academic institutions through race uplifting, self-realization, and hard work aimed at achieving societal and economic progress (Du Bois, 2013). However, an examination of the lived experiences of African American women in executive-level administrator positions at universities and junior colleges in the United States discovered that African American women with high-level degrees and roles still contended with social inequity centered on race, gender, and social class (Exkano, 2013). Although many African American women associate social class with their level of education, they also believed that having an education improved their race and demonstrated intelligence, morality, and ingenuity (Gaines, 2012; Piff, Stancato, Côté, Mendoza-Denton, & Keltner, 2012). Regardless of the odds against conquering leadership positions at the executive level, African American women continue to pursue advanced degrees and attempt to move up to the next level in their professional careers; education has been used to overcome barriers in organizations, colleges, and universities (Cain, 2015; Du Bois, 2013; Gaines, 2012; Piff et al., 2012).

The political and economic statuses of African American women have given them the "standpoint" (Collins, 2012) of being "outsiders within." They were both inside and

outside of the group, which created awareness and knowledge that validated, documented, and encouraged resistance to oppression (Collins, 2012). African American women throughout history cultivated their ideas and understandings about black womanhood in a society that historically denied them as a “person” by restricting access to the privileges and rights enjoyed by White, middle-class, and heterosexual women (Collins, 2012). The concept “standpoint” for Black women described the attachment between them and their shared struggles against racism and sexism, which invigorated and empowered them (Davis, 2012).

### **Organization Practices and Policies**

Researchers have explored potential causes for the continued gender gap between women and men in senior leadership positions and found that organizational, structural, and cultural barriers prevented women in general from advancing in organizations (Bryant & Garnham, 2014; Groysberg & Connolly, 2013; Johns, 2013; Kark & Eagly, 2010; Nugent, Dinolfo, & Giscombe, 2013; Tarmy, 2012). Organizational, structural, and cultural barriers such as long work hours, emphasis on mobility, masculine organizational cultures, social capital, and nonattainment of desirable assignments limited women’s access to leadership positions, especially those that confer high power and authority (Bryant & Garnham, 2014; Johns, 2013; Kark & Eagly, 2010). Groysberg and Connolly (2013) examined leadership styles perceived as necessary and efficient in breaking through gender barriers, how individuals perceived leadership to be affected by gender, and whether those perceptions created a limitation or disadvantage for women. They found that barriers presented by race in the workforce were slight compared to the

obstacles women faced when attempting to establish the social capital necessary for promotions (Groysberg & Connolly, 2013). Because of structural barriers in organizations, women's, and especially African American women's, access to social networks was restricted, which prevented them from obtaining the resources and skills viewed as valuable for advancing (Bryant & Garnham, 2014; Tarmy, 2012). Although mentoring programs teach all women how to behave in organizations as leaders, African American women had to learn what "to say and not say" which was far more important than "what to do and say" (Tarmy, 2012). While discrimination in the workplace of this sort is illegal and may occur unintentionally, unconscious biases in organizations that impede the progress of African American women are implanted in the culture (Groysberg & Connolly, 2013).

Wynn (2012) explored whether women experienced inequality because of structural barriers or because of their individual efforts. It was reported that women experienced structural barriers in organizations when they assumed that individual efforts in their daily task led to success, and working long hours, having young children and being single mothers influenced their individual efforts (Wynn 2012: p.2); however, inequality went unacknowledged until women experienced visible and persistent barriers that challenged their individual efforts. Ibarra and Petriglieri (2016) conceptualized how subtle forms of gender bias in cultures and organizations interfered with the identity work of women leaders. Most organizational structures and practices came into existence when women's presence in the labor force was small and unacknowledged, making it difficult for women to obtain leadership positions. The perception that men were better leaders

than women rationalized why there were more men in leadership roles, and this disparity in numbers reinforced the idea that men were more suited to leadership, creating a vicious cycle (Ibarra & Petriglieri, 2016; Kark & Eagly, 2010).

While subtle organizational barriers challenged women when they attempted to form an identity as a leader, developing identities as leaders was an interrelated effort that required the help of an informal network (Ibarra & Petriglieri, 2016). Women who networked with men developed leadership identities quicker than those that did not, and doors opened to leadership opportunities; the type of networking activities in which they participated determined who saw them and what they learned (Ibarra & Petriglieri, 2016). When women networked with only women, they received fewer leadership opportunities, less recognition, fewer endorsements, and insufficient visibility to validate their leadership credentials (Ibarra & Petriglieri, 2016). Because women were reluctant about participating in required and important activities with men out of fear of appearing inauthentic and overly involved, networking relationships with men were complex and multifaceted (Ibarra & Petriglieri, 2016). As a result, cultural and organizational biases that inadvertently favored men impeded the identity work of accomplished and determined women who aspired to leadership levels (Ibarra & Petriglieri, 2016). Although mentoring programs clearly impact women's advancement to executive leadership levels, professional development programs and opportunities in organizations were less structured for women. According to Kark and Eagly (2010), organizations appeared as if they provided equal opportunities for advancement for women and men, and yet, their social structure and culture created more challenges for women than men.

Formal tasks, rules, procedures, standards, and even the code of conduct in organizations challenged women, and their decreased ability to advance in their career at their present place of employment exemplified the reality that organizations have not identified goals and career paths that women could follow (Johns, 2013; Kark & Eagly, 2010).

### **Stereotyping**

An additional barrier to the advancement of African American women in corporate environments was stereotyping. Historically, African American women had been targets of stereotyping in societies that resulted in fewer opportunities made to them in organizations (Kottke & Agars, 2015). According to Kottke and Agars (2015), traditional stereotypes such as modern sexism and negative attitudes were seen in behaviors both overt and subtle, providing an obstacle for women aspiring to upper-level roles. Researchers reported that negative attitudes and behaviors in organizations were hard to detect, which led to sex typing of jobs and expectations of men having superior capabilities as leaders (Dietrich et al., 2013; Kottke & Agars, 2015).

Davies-Netzley (2013) examined perceptions about women's corporate mobility and the strategies they used to be successful in leadership positions and found that explanations given for corporate mobility and success were racially based and gendered. Caucasian men and women took "race" for granted, and Caucasian men authorized the dominant stratified ideologies (Davies-Netzley, 2013). Caucasians believed that corporate success and mobility came from hard work and competition; downplayed was the degree in which the competition was limited to upper-class, American-born, Caucasian men (Davies-Netzley, 2013). Barriers for African American and Caucasian women were

consistent in organizations, and denial of covert and overt exercise of power contributed to persistent resistance to change (Davies-Netzley, 2013). The two-fold marginalization of women of color places them at a disadvantage versus Caucasian women in corporate management, as they must negotiate work environments characterized by negative stereotypes of both their ethnic group and gender (Giscombe and Mattis, 2002).

### **The Glass Ceiling**

The glass ceiling, defined by the U. S. Department of Labor in 1991, refers to artificial barriers that kept women and minorities from advancing into managerial levels in their organization due to organizational biases. The Glass Ceiling Commission reported in 1995 that these barriers were numerous and stifled the attempts of women to achieve executive leadership positions (Jones, 2013). In corporate environments, societal barriers such as prejudice, discrimination, culture-, gender-, and race-based differences cause women to be denied opportunities and success (Jones, 2013). Organizations that base employment decisions on an individual's sex or race, and the societal norms, perceptions, and behaviors that create occupational sex segregation are in violation of Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (Stainback & Tomaskovic-Devey, 2012). Moreover, regulatory barriers that impede the collection and analysis of employment data, along with the lack of efficient and regular monitoring of compliance with affirmative action programs, have led to the continued underrepresentation of women and minorities at the executive and chief executive level (Jones, 2013). Barriers to recruitment and outreach limit the number of women in applicant pools, and the corporate climate limits the mobility of those who have been hired because of their distinct

communication styles, behaviors, and patterns of socialization (Jones, 2013). African American women have been particularly limited by the invisible barriers of the glass ceiling throughout their progression to leadership (Branche, 2012). Career pipeline barriers such as a lack of mentors and networks, an abundance of dead-end jobs, and different standards applied to men and women's performances have prevented most women from obtaining leadership roles at any level (Jones, 2013).

Gregory-Mina (2012) extensively reviewed the literature concerning gender barriers that apply to women who strive for corporate officer positions and found that women experienced effects of the glass ceiling because societal barriers evolved in an organization's culture that kept them from advancing at the same pace as men. Given that men had an easier path into leadership roles, women wishing to advance more rapidly in their career had to either leave their company or change their geographic residence (Gregory-Mina, 2012). Furthermore, within global organizations, women experience the expatriate glass ceiling, an additional barrier arising from them being overlooked when corporations send employees on international assignments (Gregory-Mina, 2012). In our global economy, the attainment of international experience is not only valuable but required for leadership positions at executive levels, and when denied international assignments, promotions into these roles due to gender-based prejudices prevent them from obtaining an equal opportunity to work abroad and acquire international experience (Tucker, 2012). Under Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 the refusal to employ a woman, or to only consider her for positions thought to be appropriate for females, is

prohibited, and many women are illegally mistreated by the organizations and academic institutions for which they work (Stainback & Tomaskovic-Devey, 2012).

Pompper (2012) examined the intersectionality of age, ethnicity, and gender identities among women of color working in senior management who were trying to break through the glass ceiling and change companies from the inside. Pompper (2012) reported that even highly talented and educated women of color still face uncertainty, agitation, fear, frustration, disappointment, and anger when describing their inefficacious attempts to break through glass ceiling in corporate America (Pompper, 2012). Because of age-, race-, and sex-based discrimination in organizations, the glass ceiling for women of color is not penetrable, and though organizations are more diverse in leadership at both lower and upper levels than in the past, admission into executive levels is seemingly forbidden (Pompper, 2012). As a result of senior leadership's failure to correct deficiencies in diversity at the executive leadership level, organizations are still "White boys' networks" characterized by a strategic racism that is subtle but destructive (Pompper, 2012). Despite the achievements of Women's and Civil Rights movements, if organizations had changed their culture to be more inclusive, more educated African American women would be CEOs of major organizations, directors of non-profits, and members of independent boards of directors (Pompper, 2012). In the 21st century, fairness and equality of opportunity continue to be an issue of concern for women, especially African American women, in corporate America (Dworkin, Maurer, & Schipani, 2012). Women of color must demand that improvements in employment situations and advancement opportunities occur, or they will remain in lower-level



positions of organizations (Holvino, 2010). Though African American women have recently obtained more leadership positions in public and private organizations, they continue to endure hostile work environments and isolation, and they remain underrepresented at the top of organizational pyramids (Holvino, 2010).

## **Current Overview**

### **The Glass Ceiling**

The glass ceiling (or concrete ceiling) has been a symbol of the historical barriers that have obstructed the goals and advancement of African American women in organizations. Haley (2015) explored and described feelings of twenty women that had attempted to break the glass ceiling at Fortune 1000 companies. The research data revealed that women who have either broken the glass ceiling or have attempted to do so have faced barriers throughout their careers and are still facing them in their current role (Haley, 2015). These women had to deal with senior leadership members that were not aware of barriers and who held perceptions of women being passive-aggressive or not firm enough to lead. Because women do not fit in with the ‘good old boys’ network, they are not encouraged to pursue executive leadership roles and not assigned to projects that would develop them and enable them to progress through the various levels in organizations (Haley, 2015). When attempting to obtain a position at the senior leadership level, gaining visibility was crucial to the career progression of women. The glass ceiling is still in place for women in corporate environments despite their advancements and career tenure (Haley, 2015).

Johnson (2015) performed a sequential mixed-method analysis of the evolution of 33 African American women leaders' experiences and behaviors displayed while achieving success in their roles and found that 98% of them experienced leadership challenges because of their race, including refusal of advancement opportunities that have stalled their careers. Although the number of women in executive level positions has improved in several industries, the rarity of promotion of African American women has not changed (Johnson, 2015). Despite steps made to increase race and gender parity at the leadership level in Fortune 500 companies, the glass ceiling has allowed only a very few successful African American women in corporate America to mentor young women and serve as a source of inspiration.

Weatherspoon-Robinson (2013) qualitatively explored and assessed African American women's leadership characteristics, obstacles, strategies for success, and resilience in industries dominated by White males. Results revealed that although African American women are collaborative, results-driven, rewarding, and caring individuals who value autonomy, obstacles to their advancement such as work-life balance and stereotyped attitudes towards them have impeded their progress. It was found that women that had to be more flexible in managing their work and personal obligations, which suggested that balancing leadership roles required precise support systems that theoretically served as a network and family (Weatherspoon-Robinson, 2013). It was also revealed that African American women who were the only member of their race and sex at the leadership level within an organization struggled with stereotypes that impacted their careers negatively, although in rare instances they could actually benefit from

stereotypes. Additionally, the study revealed that candid communication on the part of African American women promoted harmful stereotypes of them being perceived as aggressive. Given the resilience of the glass ceiling and the adversities resulting from negative stereotypes and a lack of mentors, African American women in leadership positions in male-dominated organizations experience bias and discrimination. Although racist and sexist behaviors in corporations are less frequent and blatant than in the past, these attitudes still exist (Weatherspoon-Robinson, 2013). Overcoming barriers to success in the highest ranks of Fortune 500 companies has been no easy task for African American women.

### **Race, Gender, and Class**

The studies in the literature review articulated the experiences of African American women leaders with an emphasis on how race, sex, class, organizational practices and procedures, stereotypes, a lack of mentors and organizational support, gender inequalities, and the glass ceiling impact their ascension to leadership roles at all levels in organizations. Elmer (2016) examined various theories and practices related to gender bias and how it affected women of color who shared various minority characteristics such as their race/ethnicity, class, and family of origin. When pursuing leadership positions, women of color endure barriers that arise due to their racial, educational, and religious backgrounds (Elmer, 2016). Although racial bias and intergroup bias created a double bind for women of color, several have managed to obtain leadership positions at lower and middle levels, and a few have risen to the executive level. The paths of women and minorities are different, and their success has depended on

their upbringing, the level of the leadership they have pursued, the presumptions of decision makers, and the nature of their department or organization (Elmer, 2016).

Despite the achievements of African American women, major issues continue to impede their success in corporate America, including single status, stereotyped attitudes, and different standards for evaluation compared to Whites and males

Harris-LaMothe (2013) identified the perceived impact of negotiating cultural and professional identities on the career trajectories of professional African American women. The research study revealed that feelings of discrimination, an absence of "safe" physical spaces, tokenism, class-level disparity and racial and ethnic differences were perceived as having the biggest impact on the career trajectories of African American women. Race and ethnicity defined their attitudes and beliefs about attainment and were sources of conflict for African American women who believed they needed an "acceptable" form of cultural identity in an organization (Harris-LaMothe, 2013).

African American women's perceptions about discrimination affected their professional and personal decisions, which ultimately affected the success they had in their careers (Harris-LaMothe, 2013). Both race and sex of African American women contribute to negative stereotypes about their behavior; they may be viewed as angry, bitter, and combative by colleagues when they speak candidly and genuinely (Harris-LaMothe, 2013), and this may prevent them from attaining professional success. African American women perceived that their organizations were engaged in racist and sexist practices and felt subjected to constant racism in both their personal and professional lives. In response to these perceived racist and sexist conditions in organizations, closed networks have

been created for professional African American women on the rise (Harris-LaMothe, 2013). Race and sex of African American women negatively affects their sense of place in an organization (Harris-LaMothe: p. 89). The lack of diversity in leadership positions limits the number of safe places where African American women vent or voice their concerns and frustrations about their professional careers, causing them to feel unintentionally stranded (Harris-LaMothe, 2013).

### **Stereotyping**

Although African American women are more visible than before, they continue to experience barriers such as stereotyping, which has hindered their professional growth (Beckwith, Carter, & Peters, 2016; Davis & Maldonado, 2015; Schwanke, 2013). African American women have experienced negative stereotyping in regards to roles, abilities, and work ethics when aspiring to upper-level positions, which has led them to be portrayed as ineffective leaders (Hiel, 2016). They endure considerable “emotional labor” (the effort involved in displaying contextually appropriate behavior) in order to be accepted and promoted into upper-leadership positions (Randolph & Dahling, 2013). Performing emotional labor allowed African American women an opportunity to increase their compatibility with the standards of an organization (Schwanke, 2013). The experiences of African American women in organizations have been shaped by race, gender, expected norms, sanctions, and organizational rules that are not free from bias. African American women have variable experience with stereotyping (Sepand, 2015). Not all African American women have been affected by stereotypes, but many have suffered from the effects of the stereotypical ideas that have assisted with maintaining

White dominance in organizations (Reynolds-Dobbs et al., 2009). African American women's perceived inability to be authentic and effective is attributable to conforming to the values and organizational standards of the dominant group (Reynolds et al., 2009). Environments with high levels of stereotyping of minority groups have reduced the desires of women to pursue upper-level leadership positions (Casad, 2016). When women and people of color witnessed stereotyped behaviors from the dominant group members, they expected and prepared for negative stereotypical perceptions or judgments of their work ethics (Casad, 2016). Women's fears of being negatively stereotyped have even caused them to conceptually separate their work and gender identities (Von Hippel, Kalokerinos, & Zacher, 2016). Threats of being stereotyped have lowered African American women's motivational levels and desires to advance, creating job dissatisfaction that has resulted in them resigning from organizations (Casad, 2016).

### **Organizational Practices and Processes**

Numerous organizations have procedures that stereotype and discriminate against particular job candidates and workers (Berry, 2012). Berry (2012) studied the individual effects of race and sex on policies and practices that have organized and categorized individuals by race, gender, and class in what are termed inequality regimes (Acker, 2009; Stainback, Tomaskovic-Devey & Skaggs, 2012). In inequality regimes, women endured barriers throughout their journey to executive level status (Acker, 2009). The reasoning, interaction, and organized processes in these organizations generated and supported power distinctions, and anticipated that ultimately inertia would be created

(Stainback et al., 2012). Unequal regimes obstruct women's opportunities and contribute to their underrepresentation at higher ranks in organizations (Acker, 2009).

Organizational processes in large organizations change when women occupying executive-level positions are involved but until then only modest changes take place at the top (Acker, 2009). Gendered and racialized views are products of both history and culture, and they continue to influence many organizations (Stainback et al., 2012). The scarcity of women in executive level positions of organizations has made work life difficult for women in lower-level roles (Acker, 2009). The influence that organizational practices have had on the professional advancement of women aspiring to executive level positions has been viewed as only a women's issue, and not one for society as a whole (D'Augustino & Levine, 2010). Women concentrating on responsibilities involving families are reluctant to use family-friendly policies due to fears that their careers would be threatened by negative assessments concerning their priorities (Von Hippel et al., 2016).

### **The Lived Experiences of African American Women in Corporate America**

#### **Current Qualitative Studies**

Davis and Maldonado (2015) identified the structural barriers that have kept African American women underrepresented in senior leadership roles. They found that perceptions as to why African American woman are underrepresented in senior leadership roles included the ideas that they are not "predestined" for success, that there is an absence of sponsorships, that they suffer the double jeopardy of race and sex, that they have not learned how to "play the game", and that they have not participated in

“paying it forward.” They also described how the intersection of race and sex adversely affected the career trajectory and development of African American women (Davis & Maldonado, 2015) due to a lack of development opportunities. Holder, Jackson, and Ponterotto (2015) examined unintentional racial discrimination in organizations and found that African American women were routinely subject to stereotyping, invisibility, and exclusion. Their findings indicated that African American women in senior-level corporate positions have their competence, intellect, and capabilities undermined and challenged (Holder et al., 2015: p. 174). Also revealed was how unintentional racial discrimination insults African American women’s intellectual abilities and achievements and contributes to negative performance evaluations that adversely affect rates of promotion and compensation (Holder et al., 2015). The study also illustrated how African American women experienced limited mentoring and sponsorship opportunities and were excluded and overlooked by colleagues.

African American women have had to seek professional and personal safe spaces in order to assess whether or not their perception of racial discrimination was accurate and to avoid responding to the incident (Holder et al., 2015). Internalizing the unintentional discrimination that African American women face in the workplace often diminishes their self-confidence, hinders their work performance, and causes cultural distrust among their Caucasian colleagues. An African American woman at work serves as a representation of all African American women; their behaviors are scrutinized and monitored, they are not allowed to make mistakes, they have to be exceptional at all times and work twice as hard to disprove negative stereotypes (Cain, 2015).. In a study



that was shared with the business community, Cain (2015) illustrated how having a successful career was difficult for African American women, and they had to be dedicated, determined, and willing to sacrifice their time; often they had to choose between career and family. Sepand (2015) reported that mentoring, training, and networking opportunities are the most effective tools women of color can use to advance in organizations, but for these strategies to work, organizations must acknowledge the race- and gender-based biases among the staff and in the culture of the organization. Although organizations typically provide some form of training, networking, and mentoring programs, African American women are often dissatisfied with them because they would prefer to have mentors who look like them (Sepand, 2015).

### **The Lack of African American Women in Chief Executive Officers**

#### **Current Quantitative Studies**

Quantitative studies documenting the lack of African American women CEOs in Fortune 500 companies have pointed to causes that include unconscious bias, negative self-perceptions, stereotypes, and a lack of same-sex and same-race mentors. In a cross-sectional study focused on the significance of having role models of the same race and sex, Galloway (2016) found that the lack of role models resembling African American women was a major barrier for those who sought senior-level leadership roles. This lack of role models impacted their identities as African Americans and their leadership potential (Galloway, 2016); study participants indicated that African American women role models improved other black women's self-efficacy and motivation and inspired those with the same goals. Ramchunder and Martin (2014) explored how self-efficacy

related to an individual's emotional intelligence and influenced their leadership effectiveness. They found that the presence of African American women role models with high emotional intelligence helped other black women increase their level of emotional intelligence, creating highly effective organizations (Ramchunder & Martin, 2014).

Jackson's (2012) examination of the leadership self-efficacy beliefs of African American women in leadership positions found that despite their emotional competence, they needed high levels of self-efficacy and emotional intelligence in order to manage the challenges and barriers that caused their leadership abilities to be questioned. Barriers such as stereotypes that targeted their race and sex were found to damage the success of strong, confident, and capable African American women, ultimately weakening their capacity to perform on the job (Jackson, 2012). Furthermore, in-group bias and favoritism added obstacles for African American women because negative perceptions about their leadership competencies excluded them from informal networks that provided advice and support (Rhode & Packel, 2014; Sheppard & Aquino, 2013). African American women reported exclusion from informal networks as a huge contributing factor to their underrepresentation at the executive and CEO level and believed that perceptions of their level of intelligence, motivation, and dedication determined if they became members (Sheppard & Aquino, 2013).

Sheppard & Aquino (2013) studied how stereotyping in organizations, leadership styles, and mentoring opportunities influence advancement of African American women leaders at the middle- and upper-levels. These authors found (Sheppard & Aquino, 2013:

p. 70) that stereotypes and mentors influenced advancement but that leadership styles did not; African American women with mentors received assistance, direction, strength, and inspiration from women established in their leadership role. With mentoring, African American women had an opportunity to gain acceptance into in-groups, which led to networking with executive leaders and the visibility required to advance. However, results of the research indicated that stereotypes about African American women portrayed them as inadequate as leaders because in-group members assumed they lacked skills, expertise, and potential. Therefore, internal barriers within organizations are found to be the leading factor in the underrepresentation of African American women at the executive level. Leaders' negative perceptions about African American women still exist, and stereotypical images of them as Jezebels or Superwomen prevent the increase of diverse talent at the executive level (Jackson, 2012).

### **Summary and Conclusion**

The studies cited here articulate the experiences of African American women leaders in Fortune 500 companies and the barriers they face. Barriers such as race, gender inequalities, class, organizational practices, processes, support, stereotypes, the lack of mentors and networks, low visibility, poor perceptions of self-efficacy, and the glass ceiling influence and impact African American women's attempts to ascend to leadership in corporate America. In order to advance, African American women have tried to display work-appropriate behaviors so as to avoid stereotypical images that label them as angry, combative, and aggressive. Stereotyped images have caused African American women to be subjected to racist and sexist behaviors in organizations with practices and

policies that legitimize the behaviors of executive leaders who believe that the dominant group should remain on top. A gap in the literature remains, however; researchers have not focused on African American women who have advanced into executive level roles during the last ten years (Catalyst, 2013).

Current qualitative studies on the lack of African American Women CEOs in corporate America, and on the lived experiences of African American women who aspire to CEO positions, align with the scope of the present study, which will add to the existing literature. The present study fills a gap in the literature relating to how African American women have advanced into executive level positions recently, with some even reaching the level of CEO. Previous researchers have indicated that there was a need for additional studies examining the lived experiences of African American women aspiring to these CEO positions in corporate America (Cain, 2015; Davis & Maldonado, 2015; Sepand, 2015). Results of previous studies revealed that race, gender, class, and the intersections among these categories were factors in the stereotyping of African American women and have contributed to their underrepresentation in CEO positions. Leadership opportunities for African American women have been limited and disempowering. The authority and skills of African American women were questioned, and they were excluded from social networks. Barriers in organizations have prevented African American women from advancing into CEO positions because they did not “fit” leadership prototypes in organizations dominated by men, and they have encountered significant challenges associated with stereotypical perceptions and images (Livingston et al., 2012).

Additional research that describes the lived experiences of African American women who have attained executive-level and CEO positions in Fortune 500 companies is needed. Although African American women are underrepresented at the CEO level, their numbers have improved at the levels of manager, senior manager, associate director, director, senior director, vice president, and senior vice president. Further qualitative research into the lived experiences of African American women aspiring to CEO positions in Fortune 500 companies will identify new opportunities, barriers, organizational support, and strategies that benefit professional women seeking similar roles in major organizations.

Chapter 2 has thus included the literature supporting the research topic and affirmed that gaps in the literature persist. A qualitative research methodology with a phenomenological research design was applicable in gathering information for this study, and the data collected will be added to the existing literature. Chapter 3 presents the research method, design, role of the researcher, methodology, and issues of trustworthiness. Additional sections include the protection of human participants and the dissemination of findings.

### **Research Approaches to the Problem**

The gap in the literature exists concerning the lived experiences of African American who have advanced into a chief executive level or associate director, director, senior director, vice president, and presidents roles within the last decade (ABD, 2011; Catalyst, 2013). Current qualitative phenomenological research about the lived experiences of African American women who aspire to CEO positions has focused on the

intersections among race, gender, class, stereotyping, and leadership experiences (Byrd, 2009; Jean-Marie et al., 2009; Jean-Marie & Martinez, 2007; Lloyd, 2009; Petitt, 2009; Stanley, 2009). Barriers such as racially-, gender-, and class-based differences, stereotyping, and unintentionally racist organizational practices and procedures have been found to be critical factors in the lack of African American women CEOs in Fortune 500 companies. Reports have revealed that the numbers of African American women in executive level positions has, however, increased (Black, 2012; BLS, 2013; Catalyst, 2012; EEOC, n.d.; Key et al., 2012; Leonard, 2012). The paucity of literature documenting African American women in CEO roles necessitates additional qualitative studies examining the lived experiences of African American women who aspire to CEO positions in Fortune 500 companies. Generalizing African American women's experiences in the same context as those of Caucasian women and other female minorities dilutes their voices to the point of nonexistence (Etter-Lewis, 1993).

In contrast to this treatment, Stanley (2009) articulated the experiences of African American women explicitly. The literature reviewed provides the rationale for choosing to study the lived experiences of African American women aspiring to CEO positions in Fortune 500 companies. The underrepresentation of African American women in CEO positions has been studied, but a recent increase in African American women into leadership positions more broadly, in defiance of the glass ceiling metaphor, has been reported (Jackson et al., 2014; Kay & Gorman, 2012; Purdie-Vaughns et al., 2015). Inconsistent findings revealed that women and minorities faced disadvantages in upward mobility only at the lower level; this is questionable since the number of females

(including African American women) in executive-level roles has increased (Jackson et al., 2014; Kay & Gorman, 2012).

A quantitative approach can be taken, in which variables such as race, gender, stereotypes, and organizational practices and procedures are subject to statistical analysis to explain and predict the phenomenon of non-advancement of African American women. Advantages of addressing the research problem quantitatively include the ability to measure when, how often, and how many of the data related to the lack of African American women in CEO roles vary across the lived experiences of the African American women who aspire to such positions. A weakness of the quantitative research methodology is its inability to obtain comprehensive views or understanding of the experiences of the African American women aspiring to become CEOs. Another weakness of the quantitative approach is an inability to explain why African American women aspiring to CEO positions have experienced certain behaviors in organizations. An alleviation of adverse effects of race on advancement can increase opportunities for African American women and other minorities to climb the corporate ladder (Festestejian et al., 2013). Most research studies reviewed here have used quantitative methodologies.

The summary conclusion is that qualitative research methodology is most valuable in obtaining information on “The Lack of African American Women CEOs, in Corporate America” from the lived experiences of African American women aspiring to CEO positions in Fortune 500 companies. The qualitative phenomenological research is the research design of choice because it can incorporate the astute perspectives of African American women in mid- to upper-level managerial positions who aspire to become

CEOs (Lewis-Beck, Bryman, & Liao, 2015). This qualitative research study provides some answers to questions posed about African American women in corporate America and their experiences related to advancement opportunities and the support they have received that could prepare them for the role of CEO. African American women aspiring to CEO positions in Fortune 500 companies have an opportunity to tell their stories in a qualitative research design. One strong example (Miles & Huberman, 2013) captured the individual thoughts, feelings, and interpretations of African American women's experiences, controlled the chronological flow of the qualitative data, showed how certain experiences led to particular outcomes, and developed a rich, descriptive narrative. Words organized into stories or incidents provide a solid, intense, and meaningful essence that often proves far more convincing to readers than summarized pages of numbers (Miles & Huberman, 2013).

A qualitative research methodology was applicable in gathering the desired information on the lived experiences of African American women aspiring to CEO positions, which adds to the existing literature on the lack of African American women CEOs. Quantitative research studies cannot similarly relate these unique lived experiences; rather, they are deductive and confirmatory in nature (Trochim, Donnelly, & Arora, 2015). A mixed method approach utilizing both qualitative and quantitative data analysis (Creswell, 2012) was not feasible for this study. Mixed method approaches require the researcher to make philosophical assumptions as to how to combine qualitative and quantitative data. This method of research requires that researchers put an enormous amount of time in the field, and is very expensive. The strength of the mixed



method approach is that the results of one method can be used to inform the study as it employs the other method. Another strength associated with using a mixed method approach is its ability to eliminate biases that arise from using just a single method. Also, with a mixed method approach, the type, quality, and richness of the data are rare and unique (Ortiz & Roscigno, 2009). In mixed method research, randomly selected participants are surveyed in the quantitative section, and subsamples of the participants are subject to more detailed qualitative research.

Alternatively, in qualitative phenomenological studies, participants selected for the study must have experienced some phenomenon of interest. Qualitative research methodology helps to explain why African American women are underrepresented in CEO positions in corporate America. The perceptions that African American women pursuing CEO positions have concerning the increase in their numbers at the executive level more generally, provides a missing link that can benefit other professional women seeking similar roles in some of the largest organizations in the world. Also, the information can be used to provide organizations with additional leadership development opportunities that serve to retain minorities and encourage them to expand their talent pool. Organizations with few or no African American women in executive roles limit the access of the employees to talented role models and mentors needed in the global business environment (Anderson & Collins, 2007).

### **Summary and Conclusion**

In corporate America, African American women are underrepresented in executive and CEO positions (Black, 2012; BLS, 2013; Catalyst, 2012; EEOC, n.d; Key

et al., 2012; Leonard, 2012). Researchers indicated that barriers associated with the glass ceiling were a problem for African American women and other minorities aspiring to CEO roles in organizations (Hillman, Cannella, & Harris, 2002; Key et al., 2012; Schaefer, 2008). Researchers identified barriers including the intersections of race, gender, class, organizational practices and policies, and stereotyping as contributing to the underrepresentation of African American women in CEO positions (Davidson & Burke, 2011; Eagly & Chin, 2010; Latu et al., 2011; London et al., 2012; Robinson & Nelson, 2008; Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010). Powerful African American women were forced to avoid “agentic” leadership styles to avoid stereotypical images and perceptions of being aggressive, domineering, and arrogant (Acker, 2009; D’Agostino & Levine, 2010; Dobbs, Thomas, & Harrison, 2008; Giscombe, 2011, Hoyt, Johnson, Murphy, & Skinell, 2010; Ortiz & Roscigno, 2009; Reynolds-Berry & Bell, 2012; Stainback et al., 2010). The gap in the literature reviewed shows that researchers have not focused previous or current studies on African American women who have over the last ten years advanced into executive level roles (ABD, 2011; Catalyst, 2013). Researchers have believed that the slight increase of women in manager, senior manager, associate director, director, senior director, and vice president, president, and CEO positions contradicts the glass ceiling metaphor (Jackson et al., 2014; Kay & Gorman, 2012; Purdie-Vaughns, 2015; Zeng, 2009).

Current qualitative studies on the lack of African American women CEOs that detail the lived experiences of those who aspire to CEO positions exist; these align with the scope of the study and research questions. The present study adds to the existing

literature. The present research also fills the gap in the literature concerning how African American women have advanced into executive level positions in the last decade, with some even reaching CEO. Jean-Marie (2013) indicated that there is a need for additional studies examining the lived experiences of African American women aspiring to CEO positions in corporate America. Leadership opportunities for African American women have been limited and often disempowering. The authority and skills of African American women have been questioned, and they have been excluded from social networks (Byrd, 2014, Jean-Marie & Martinez, 2013; Stanley, 2009). The literature reviewed also shows more quantitative research studies that focused on the barriers that prevented African American women from advancing into CEO positions. The quantitative research studies on the lack of African American women CEOs found that African American women did not “fit” leadership prototypes in organizations dominated by men. African American women encountered significant challenges associated with stereotype threats, stereotypical perceptions, and stereotyped images (Calas, & Smircich, 2014; Hoyt, 2012; Kolb, 2013; Livingston et al., 2012; Rosette & Livingston, 2012).

The current qualitative literature on the lived experiences of African American women who aspired to CEO positions focused on the intersection of race, gender, class, and organizational processes and procedures (Byrd, 2014; Jean-Marie & Martinez, 2013; Stanley, 2009). Researchers have not, however, analyzed the corporate advancement of African American women over the last ten years (ABD, 2011 & Catalyst, 2013). An explanation for the increase in women (and African American women in particular) acquiring executive-level roles and, more rarely, CEO positions needs to include the lived

experiences of the women aspiring to these roles. The literature reveals that African American women encountered barriers in the pursuit of CEO positions. Although vastly underrepresented at the level of CEO, African American women have made recent progress ascending to become managers, senior managers, associate directors, directors, senior directors, vice presidents, and senior vice presidents, which indicates the glass ceiling can be occasionally breached (Galloway, 2012; Smith, Caputi, & Crittenden, 2012). Further research studies that focus on the lived experiences of African American women aspiring to CEO positions in corporate America in the United States using a qualitative research methodology will identify new opportunities, barriers, organizational support, and additional strategies that will benefit other professional women seeking similar roles in some of the major organizations. Chapter 2 included a review of the research literature that supported the research topic, entitled “The Lack of African American Women CEOs in Corporate America” and affirms the paucity of relevant literature. A qualitative research methodology with the phenomenological research design was applicable in collecting information, and data collected here will add to the existing literature. Chapter 3 presents the research method, design, role of the researcher, methodology, and issues of trustworthiness. Additional sections included the protection of human participants and the dissemination of findings. Chapter 3: Research Method

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this study was to examine the lived experiences of African American women who aspire to CEO roles to obtain a better understanding of why there continues to be a limited number of African American women in CEO roles in the United

States. I reviewed the experiences and perceptions of these women to obtain a better understanding as to why there continues to be a limited number of African American women CEOs in corporate America despite the increase of African American women in executive-level roles. In this chapter, I present the research method and design, identify my role as researcher, and review the instrumentation and data analysis plan.

### **Research Design, Method, and Rationale**

I collected data for this qualitative phenomenological study to answer the following central research question: What are the lived experiences of African American women aspiring to CEO positions in Fortune 500 companies, a part of corporate America? There were also four sub-questions:

1. What contributed to the increase of African American women in positions as directors, senior directors, vice presidents, and senior vice presidents in corporate America?
2. How did these factors contribute to the increase of African American women in directors, senior directors, vice presidents, and senior vice president's positions in corporate America?
3. What apparent factors play a part in the lack of African American women in CEO positions in Fortune 500 companies, a part of corporate America?
4. Describe how these factors play a role in the lack of African American women in CEO positions.

The central concept of this study was the lack of African American women CEOs in corporate America. While the number of African American women at the executive

leadership level has increased in corporate America, African American women continue to face barriers related to race, gender, class, stereotyping, and organizational processes and practices when aspiring to CEO positions in Fortune 500 companies. Previous researchers have noted the disparity between the number of African Americans occupying these positions in U.S. corporations and the number of positions available (Cain, 2015; Cook & Glass, 2014; Davis, 2012; Hopkins, 2012; Jackson, 2012). By choosing a qualitative research method, I was able to examine the lived experiences of African American women who aspire to CEO positions in corporate America. The African American women participants who experienced this phenomenon (barriers to CEO roles) provided an understanding of what they experienced when aspiring to CEO roles in corporate America.

### **Research Method**

A qualitative research method was appropriate for this study. Unlike quantitative research methods that investigate the what, where, and when of a human experience or phenomenon, qualitative research methods investigate the reasons behind these experiences or phenomena and the why and how of decision-making (Maxwell, 2013). Moustakas (1994) suggested that research questions should be broad, consisting of a central research question. Broad research questions are valuable because they solicit information that leads to a textual and structural portrait of everyday, shared experiences. I determined that a qualitative, phenomenological method was best suited to developing an understanding of what the African American women in this study experienced. Upon approval by the Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB), I posted a request

for participants, and scheduled interviews with the study participants. A semi-structured interview model was selected to examine the lived experiences of 15 African American women who aspire to CEO positions in corporate America. Meetings were conducted using the web conferencing platform GoToMeeting.

### **Research Design**

I selected a phenomenological research design because the goal was to set apart African American women's lived experiences when aspiring to CEO roles from their everyday experiences in corporate America (Illsney & Kasemann, 2014; Van Manen, 2016). An assumption of phenomenological inquiry is that the meanings attributed to a particular phenomenon are shared and mutually understood by all of the participants (Illsney & Krasemann, 2014). By using a qualitative phenomenology research method and design, I was able to examine, describe, and interpret the lived experiences of professional African American women who aspire to CEO positions (see Ritchie, 2013). My rationale for using a qualitative phenomenology approach was that this approach allowed the participants to share their lived experiences and perceptions about what it means to be an African American woman who aspires to a CEO role in corporate America. Also, qualitative phenomenology allows for the emergence of themes that confront the structural and normative beliefs about the phenomenon itself. The qualitative phenomenology method enabled me to connect complex issues of race, sex, opportunity, and organizational processes and procedures.

### **Role of the Researcher**

I was the primary instrument in the study. Onwuegbuzie and Byers (2014) noted that, in qualitative research, greater emphasis is put on the researcher as the instrument of analysis, encouraging the expansion of a more collaborative, mutual, and dialogical process concerning the individual being evaluated. In this study, I was the primary instrument collecting the data and conducting the analysis; I identified the topic, initiated actions to investigate the topic, and became responsive to the topic (see Rudestam & Newton, 2014). I was responsible for interviewing the African American women, verifying the data, transcribing the recorded data, and accurately reporting the results. All the data collected came from African American women who were presently or previously working in positions as managers, senior managers, directors, senior directors, vice presidents, and senior vice presidents who aspired to become CEOs in corporate America.

### **Researcher Bias**

As previously stated, I was the instrument of analysis in this study. Merriam (1988) noted that clarification of the researcher's biases at the beginning of a qualitative study is necessary because readers must understand the position and biases of the researcher, along with any assumptions that might affect the study. In qualitative phenomenological research, the researcher's biases can alter the results of the study; therefore, the processes of bracketing and interpreting the biases beforehand are critical. Patton (2014) defined "epoche," also known as "bracketing," as a process by which the researcher takes out, or at least is mindful of, biases, perspectives, or expectations



regarding the phenomenon under investigation. Researchers have to try and limit personal bias and keep an open mind when dealing with the phenomenon (Creswell, 2012).

Clarification of biases requires researchers to put aside their beliefs about the target phenomenon so they can accurately describe the lived experiences of the participants (Dowling & Cooney, 2012). According to Podsakoff, Mackenzie, and Podsakoff (2012), the accurate identification of potential areas of bias prevent the researcher from developing misconceptions about the data and generating inaccurate conclusions.

I am an African American woman presently employed in a Fortune 100 company who aspires to a CEO position. In a literature review of previous studies, I found common experiences between me and other professional African American women. My life experiences in a Fortune 100 company include advancing into mid- to upper-managerial positions that placed me in line for an executive-level role. However, my progression into mid- to upper-managerial roles was delayed because there was a lack of mentoring, role models, access to resources, and exposure, in addition to possible race and gender barriers. I started the research process by identifying any personal biases through reflectivity. Reflexivity involves separating all personal lived experiences from those of the participants to manage the possibility of personal bias. In a journal, I documented all prior experiences that I associated with the phenomenon to ensure that the focus was on the lived experiences of the participants in the study. I bracketed all of the experiences, information, viewpoints, and standards before collecting and analyzing the data. Bracketing ensured that the conclusions were as close as possible to what the participants meant. Also, I minimized personal biases by not having a personal or

professional relationship with study participants. I listened to the lived experiences of the participants and asked four open-ended research sub-questions to avoid influencing the direction of the responses. Each participant's interview was video recorded, transcribed, and coded according to the practices, policies, and standards of qualitative phenomenology research.

## **Methodology**

### **Population**

The population of this study consisted of African American women who were presently or previously employed in Fortune 500 companies; participants were not limited by industry. Upon approval by the Walden University IRB (#05-14-0182930), I selected a sampling size of 15 professional African American women in mid- to upper-level managerial roles who aspire to CEO positions in U.S. organizations. Participants were purposely selected for their experience and knowledge of the phenomenon concerning the lack of African American women CEOs in corporate America.

### **Sampling Strategy and Criteria**

In phenomenological research, all participants must have experience with the target phenomenon, which makes possible the ability to provide information on the topic (Creswell, 2012). I used the purposeful sampling technique to select participants for the research study. In the collection of qualitative phenomenological research data, purposeful sampling ensures that selected participants have experience with the phenomenon (Creswell, 2012). Researchers use purposeful sampling to select participants who are familiar with, or who have experience with, the target phenomenon; so, I

provided an explanation of the phenomenon was to potential participants (see Patton, 2014). Purposeful sampling facilitated the identification of African American women who had the knowledge and experience required to describe the phenomenon. Purposeful sampling also helped me determine if potential participants in the study were African American women who were enthusiastic about sharing their individual lived experiences; participants also had to aspire to CEO positions in Fortune 500 companies and demonstrate their willingness to participate in the study. The African American women who participated in this study were at least 35 years old with a minimum of 7 years of working experience in a mid- to upper-level managerial role and in Fortune 500 company. The participants' industries, departments, divisions, or groups were not specified.

In case I was not able to recruit enough participants, I developed a follow-up plan that involved the use of snowball sampling. In qualitative research, snowball sampling is a commonly used recruitment strategy when there is a problem with recruiting participants (Ritchie, Lewis & Elam, 2013). In snowball sampling, participants provide the names of other potential participants; in this case, snowball sampling would have involved asking participants to provide the names of other African American women who aspire to CEO positions and have experience with the phenomenon. I would have asked participants if they knew of other African American women who met the criteria and might have been interested in participating in the study. Although I did not expect to need a backup recruitment plan, snowball sampling was available in case low participation became a problem.

The target population was African American women previously or currently employed in a Fortune 500 company in mid- to upper-level managerial roles who aspire to a CEO position. African American women who qualified to participate in this study had experience and knowledge about the phenomenon regarding moving up the corporate ladder. Several measures were applied to ensure that participants were eligible to participate in the study. During the recruiting process, I attached the participation criteria questionnaire to the request for participants on LinkedIn (Appendix A); the questionnaire listed the requirements for taking part in this study. The criteria for participating in this study were included in the request for participants, the interview protocol, and the informed consent information, and I mentioned them before beginning the interviewing process. I used the criteria questionnaire to eliminate participants who did not meet the requirements for participation in this study.

A sample size in qualitative research studies can range from 1 - 40 (Bryman & Bell, 2015). According to Patton (2014), there is no rule for sample size in qualitative research. Researchers recommend that sampling size in qualitative research be small, and anticipate rational coverage of the phenomenon be of the study's purpose (Patton, 2014). Conklin (2012) noted that interviewing participants in phenomenological research studies generated large quantities of data from participants and required fewer participants, so 15 participants were sufficient for this study. The validity, significance, and perceptiveness of qualitative studies are associated with the abundance of information generated and the competencies of the researcher (Patton, 2014). Sampling to the point of saturation and estimating the amount of information to be collected determined the sample size (Patton,

2014). As previously stated, purposeful sampling identified and selected participants for this study.

LinkedIn, a professional social networking website, was used to contact and recruit participants. All subscribed members have access to the LinkedIn open message board and can post to the message board without obtaining permission. The researcher initiated the recruiting process by posting the need for study participants via the LinkedIn website. When responding to the request for participants, individual LinkedIn members had to complete a criteria questionnaire (Appendix B) that verified whether or not she met the criteria for participating in the study. Via email, the researcher contacted each participant who met the criteria for participating in the study and reiterated the requirements to participate. Each eligible and selected respondent received an informed consent form (Appendix C) for review and was asked to return, via email, an "I consent" response to participate in the study.

The relationship between saturation and sample size took place once all of the participants' information was collected, analyzed and no additional insight on the phenomenon investigated was received from AAWL 15 (Glaser & Strauss, 2014). Reaching saturation was a difficult point to identify as it is an elasticized notion and new data constantly contribute additional information to the study; and the stopping point to add or not to add was a subjective decision (Ritchie, Lewis & Elam, 2013). For the purpose of saturation, the researcher examined, reexamined, and analyzed the data in case a new concept or issue emerged and discontinued the data collection process when the

data collected and analyzed from AAWL 15 appeared repetitive and no new experiences were added.

### **Instrumentation**

The researcher was the primary instrument in this study.

### **Recruitment**

The researcher posted a request for participants on the message board of LinkedIn, a professional networking website. African American women responding to the posting received a criterion questionnaire (Appendix B) to complete via Survey Monkey, an online survey tool. The researcher started contacting participants via e-mail immediately until 15 questionnaires were received and 15 people met the criteria for participating in the study. Each participant received the informed consent form (Appendix C) to complete. Interested participants responded via an e-mail that read “I consent” to being included in the study and accepted the interview protocol. After sending their “I consent” email to the researcher, participants received an e-mail requesting that they schedule the day and time for the interview using GoToMeeting®. Participants received the interview questions (Appendix D) 24 hours before their scheduled interview so they could review the questions beforehand. Providing the participants with the interview questions in advance allowed them to be mindful of what the researcher was and was not going to ask during the interview and enabled them to provide more information during the actual interview (Patton, 2014).

During the initial interview, the researcher reviewed the informed consent form, which stated that their participation was strictly voluntary and emphasized that

participants could withdraw from the study at any time without any repercussions or defamation to their character. The researcher again communicated the participation criteria to the participants and reviewed the purpose of the study so that the participants understood that the purpose of the study was aligned with the open-ended research questions. The researcher then asked participants if they were comfortable with answering the research questions.

### **Data Collection**

The primary source of data for this study consisted of the transcripts generated from semi-structured interviews conducted with the participants. The open-ended questions in the interview protocol (Appendix D) supported the theoretical and conceptual frameworks of the study (Jamshed, 2014). The interview protocol was guided by the research focus of this study, which consisted of one central research question and four sub-questions (Creswell, 2012). Data was collected during one in-depth semi-structured interview session with each participant that lasted between 45 minutes to 1 hour. During the interview process, the researcher manually transcribed each participant's responses manually on the interview protocol (Appendix D).

The researcher used GoToMeeting® high definition video conferencing software to interview participants in this study. GoToMeeting® operates via webcam, allowing the researcher and participants to meet face-to-face virtually. This visual element allows the researcher to record data related to participants' facial expressions and body language, an important component of communication. Also, GoToMeeting software allows the researcher to conduct the interviews in private, which may enhance the comfort level of

interviewees. With GoToMeeting, the researcher could collect and replay video and audio recordings participant interviews as needed for review. Before completing the data collection process, member checking took place. The researcher sent the participants copies of their raw data and transcribed analysis for review. If participants agreed that the researcher accurately captured and described their lived experiences, the participants were thanked for participating in the study. The researcher reiterated that their participation and all the data collected, along with their identity, was confidential. The researcher showed gratitude to the participants by providing them with a copy of the completed dissertation.

### **Data Analysis Plan**

The data analysis strategy used in this qualitative phenomenological study was Moustakas' (1994) modified van Kaam method and the interpretative phenomenological approach. In comparison to quantitative methods, qualitative methods embrace a framework consisting of whole data, including less exclusively pre-planned linear sequences of steps or procedures in the analysis (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). The data analysis process was conducted concurrently with data collection; the analysis of data began immediately after the first interview and continued until the collected data became redundant or the collection of data was complete. The researcher also used the "epoche" technique before analyzing the data. "Epoche" is a process whereby the researcher eliminates, or at least becomes mindful of, their personal biases, perspectives, or expectations regarding the phenomenon under investigation. The researcher consciously puts aside her personal biases and eliminated any personal connections to the topic



(Patton, 2014). The researcher used the “epoche” technique to ensure that the focus was on the participants in the study. The researcher also wrote down descriptions of prior experiences associated with the phenomenon.

Based on the transcripts generated from the participant interviews, themes for analysis emerged through the process of coding that generated descriptions of the setting, people, and categories which were then organized into meaningful clusters (Creswell, 2012). The coding process started once the data was organized and transcribed. Patton (2014) noted that developing some manageable classifications or coding schemes was one of the first steps in analyzing transcribed data. Codes used in this study were developed concurrently with the interview process so that the researcher could remain receptive to the views of the participants. According to Creswell (2012), the use of predetermined codes, as opposed to allowing codes to emerge organically, would limit the study. The researcher labeled the transcribed text with specific codes; words repeatedly mentioned by participants determined the code names or labels. The analysis was completed using the computer software NVivo10® to code, sort, and organize the data. The use of a software program like NVivo10® increases the efficiency of locating, analyzing, and storing textual data, and manages discarded, irrelevant data (Creswell, 2012).

The process of analyzing the data for this study followed Moussakas (1994) phenomenological: (1) list and generate initial categories, (2) reduce and eliminate themes, (3) clustering of the significant statements took place, (4) categorize the significant statements according to their themes, (5) generate textual descriptions, (6)

construct structural descriptions, and (7) combine textured-structured and composite descriptions.

Each participant's verbatim transcript was read by the researcher and analyzed according to Moustaskas Modified Van Kaam method of analysis listed below.

1. The first step of the analysis was horizontalization. The researcher started by recording all of the participants' responses to the research questions in the study which gave them the same value (Creswell, 2012).
2. The second step involved the researcher taking apart the in-depth semi-structured interview transcripts in search of important statements, sentences, and quotations that provided some understanding of how the African American women experienced the phenomenon. This process included selecting significant sayings and statements voiced sincerely regarding the phenomenon by the participants. The researcher studied what emerging themes regarding the essential and common features of the participants' experiences, and interpreted the meaning.
3. In the third step the researcher listed the significant statements concerning how the participants (African American women) experienced the phenomenon and worked at developing a list that was not repetitive or overlapping (Creswell, 2012).
4. The fourth step required that the listing of significant statements be categorized into bigger components of information called "meaningful units" or themes. A verbatim textual description or portrait was generated based on what the participants (African American women) reportedly experienced.

5. In the fifth step the researcher generated a structural description containing the frame of the participants' experiences. Structured descriptions allowed the researcher to look beneath the effects inherent in the experiences of the participants (African American women) individually, which represent African American women as a group. The researcher demonstrated their understanding of how this group of African American women experienced what they experienced (Creswell, 2012; Moustakas, 1994).
6. In the sixth step individual textural descriptions was written using imaginative variations to interpret the meanings of the participants' experiences (Sealey & Hathorn, 2014). The improved and extended versions of the researcher's invariant themes provided the textual portrayal of the themes. The textual portrayal was only an abstract of the experience and not the essence (Patton, 2014).
7. In the seventh step, a composite description of the essences and meanings of the African American women experiences were developed. The combined textural and structural descriptions represented African American women as a group. The integrated combined textural and structural descriptions generated a combination of meanings and essences of their experiences. The essential, invariant structure or essence was the combined process (Creswell, 2012). An imaginative variation constitutes an improved or extended version of the invariant themes.

The interpretative phenomenological analysis approach (IPA) assisted the researcher in the data analysis process (Maguire, Stoddart, Flowers, McPhelim, & Kearney, 2014). The Interpretative Phenomenological Approach (IPA) and

NVivo10® software program captured overlooked themes in the transcribed data, data that articulated participants' stories, perceptions, and feelings about their experiences in Fortune 500 companies. Combining NVivo10® and IPA provided the researcher with a thorough sense of what the information meant, including the thoughts and impressions of the participants, impressions; this combination also supported the credibility of the information obtained.

### **Issues of Trustworthiness**

#### **Validity and Reliability**

In qualitative research, to ensure validity of the study suggests the findings should correspond to the viewpoints of the participants and researcher (Thompson & Pascal, 2012; Creswell, 2012). In this context, validity means that an accurate account of the findings has been checked, which suggests that the method used is reliable and has been used by numerous researchers (Creswell, 2012). Validity and reliability are two issues that concern qualitative researchers when planning a study, analyzing the results, and controlling the quality (Patton, 2014). Techniques such as bracketing and member checking confirmed the internal validity and reliability of this study.

**Bracketing.** The bracketing technique was used to document all personal experiences, biases, prejudices, and positions that perhaps impacted any interpretations of the data before the interview process began, during the interview process, and throughout the data analysis process (Creswell, 2012). Information related to the researcher's personal biases and experiences related to this study are stored in journals.

**Member checking.** Member checking was the most important technique used to

establish credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 2013). Providing the raw data and transcribed analysis collected in the study to participants for review gave them an opportunity to reflect on its accuracy and credibility (Creswell, 2012). Via email, participants received, individually, their raw data and transcribed analysis for review. The researcher asked participants if the associated themes and categories were sufficient, made sense, and if the meanings of their lived experiences were captured (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Establishing the credibility of the data collected meant that the researcher had to document detailed descriptions of the perspectives of significant themes to generate results that are rich, thick, realistic, and transferable. The comments from participants were included in the final interpretation of their lived experiences.

### **External Validity**

Establishing the credibility of the data collected meant that the researcher had to document detailed descriptions of the significant themes to generate results that are rich, thick, realistic, and transferable. Also, the comments from participants were included in the final interpretation of their lived experiences. Purposeful sampling selected only participants that had experience with the phenomenon and met the criteria of this study. The research questions protected the researcher from inappropriate generalization and were properly framed (Maxwell, 2013). The one central research question and four sub-questions that guided this study provided textural and structural descriptions of the phenomenon. The open-ended research questions focused specifically on the beliefs, events, and actions observed or asked about within the study and the contexts in which they are situated (Maxwell, 2013).

**Dependability**

Crabtree (2008) described dependability as consisting of clear descriptions of the research procedures from start to finish, with all records associated with the study available for further review, if needed. An audit trail should consist of the raw data, including all of the documents and written notes (Lincoln & Guba, 2013). The audit trail in this study includes information about the development of the themes and categories and well as the generation of findings and conclusions; the audit trail also includes the final report revealing the connections to the available literature and the incorporation of the African American women perceptions, interactions, and explanations of their lived experiences. The audit trail also contains information related to the participants' interviews. Documented notes and memos also are available for review when needed.

**Confirmability**

Confirmability corresponds to the degree to which others have the ability to verify established findings (Woods & Graber, 2016). In this study, confirmability was established by documenting the procedures used to check and recheck the data during the phases of data collection and data analysis. Objectivity/confirmability enclosed the similar neutral stances, autonomy from a misunderstood researcher's bias, and was specific about any existing foreseeable biases (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2013). Confirmability ensured that the conclusions were dependent on the responses of the participants.

## **Ethical Procedures**

### **Confidentiality**

In human subject research, ethics concerns the interactions between the researcher and participants. The ethical treatment of human subjects (participants) requires that the privacy and confidentiality of participants remain a priority throughout the study and is critical to the study's success (Creswell, 2012). Research originality depends on the trust obtained through confidentiality. According to Pollock (2012), confidentiality is the main obligation in qualitative research. Ethical qualitative research protects participants from adverse consequences, primarily through confidentiality agreements (Pollock, 2012). Participants in this study received confidentiality agreements for review and signature.

In this study, the researcher was the only one able to identify the African American women participants. Codes ranging from AAWL1 to AAWL15 identified each participant to protect their identity and kept their participation in the study confidential. Conducting interviews via GoToMeeting® video conferencing software ensured autonomy and confidentiality of the participants. The participants were guaranteed privacy and anonymity by the researcher maintaining all of the data in confidence (Calloway, 2009).

### **Informed Consent**

The success of this research study depended on the informed consent of the study participants (Creswell, 2012). The informed consent form (Appendix C) was sent to participants via email, stating the general purpose of the research study and its principal purpose. Participants were informed that their participation in this research study was

voluntary, presented no known risks to them, and participants could discontinue participation in the study at any time (Calloway, 2009). Also, participants gave their consent to participate in this study by replying to the email containing the informed consent form; the reply contained the text “I consent.” The participants’ identities remained confidential and participants were informed that the results of the study were going to be published. All of the participants’ personal information, including informed consent forms and other data, was coded and obscured to conceal their identities.

### **Treatment of Human Participants**

Access to potential study participants (African American women managers, senior managers, directors, and senior directors) was possible through the professional website LinkedIn that allows subscribed members to post to their open message board; permission is not required when utilizing the site. To ensure that there were no ethical concerns regarding the recruiting process, the researcher used purposeful sampling. Purposeful sampling selected only African American women meeting the criteria for the study. Women interested in participating in the study received a criteria questionnaire to complete. Codes on each questionnaire disguised the women identities. The study required that only 15-20 African American women meet the criteria. The researcher contacted the women selected and, at that time, again stated the purpose of the study and the criteria that must be met in order to participate. The researcher informed participants that their participation in the study was voluntary, and they could discontinue their participation at any time.



### **Treatment of Data**

The data collected in this study was used exclusively for the purpose of the researcher's dissertation. The online interviews conducted via GoToMeeting® were completely private and secure (Citrix, 2017). According to Citrix Systems, Inc., their software solutions feature end-to-end Secure Sockets Layer (SSL) and 128-bit Encrypted information (Advanced Encryption Standard [AES]) and non-encrypted information are never stored in their system. The collected data were stored on a personal computer in the researcher's home. Files associated with this study were housed in the computer software program NVivo10® (encrypted and password protected) and on an external USB drive protected by passwords and locked in a personal file cabinet purchased for this purpose only. The researcher's personal file cabinet able to be locked and stored the video and audio recordings associated with this study. The researcher's personal file cabinet will securely house and protect documents such as notes, journals, and transcriptions for five years after the completing of this study. After five years have passed, the researcher will burn all data, recordings, audio, and USB drives.

### **Dissemination of the Findings**

The findings of this research study will be disseminated to various business journals such as the *Journal of Women Studies* and professional organizations such as the Society of Human Resource Management. Other scholars will be able to contribute to research on African American women and the low number of African American women CEOs in Fortune 500 companies. The results of this research study will be disseminated to the participants in a summary report providing aggregated data only. Individual

responses of the participants will not be shared with any professional organizations or journals; only tables summarizing the data along with narratives of the participants will be shared. Future professional African American women, and young women in general, may find the results inspiring as well as educational. The findings of this study may also inspire some leaders to reflect on their organization's culture and discover that there are professional African American women who are qualified for CEO positions but are overlooked. Also, the findings might motivate some organizational leaders to change their recruiting practices, increase advancement opportunities, and reach out to qualified African American woman in line for the next executive or CEO position.

### **Summary**

Chapter 3 presented the methodology of this phenomenological study; the use of a qualitative research method allowed the researcher to examine, describe, and understand the meanings that the African American women had constructed (Creswell, 2012; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Patton, 2014). The purpose of this phenomenological inquiry was to examine the lived experiences of African American women aspiring CEO positions in corporate America, and understand how the personal lives of professional African American women were shaped by their lived experiences in organizations (Schwandt, 2014). A phenomenological qualitative research design allowed the researcher to focus on the individual experiences, beliefs, and perceptions of the African American women who agreed to participate in this study (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014).

This population of this study consisted of African American women employed previously or currently at the mid to upper managerial level in a Fortune 500 who have

aspirations of advancing to a CEO position. The sample size consisted of 15 participants. Criteria for participation in this study included African American women's willingness to share their lived experiences, including their aspirations of advancing into CEO. The semi-structured interviews with participants took place via GoToMeeting® and consisted of one central research question and four open-ended sub-questions. The researcher followed the proper ethical procedures to ensure and protect the privacy and confidentiality of the participants during and after the study. The researcher manually recorded the data collected from audio and visual recordings. The data analysis process took place immediately after the first interview and continued through the duration of the study. For data analysis, the researcher applied Moustakas' (1994) modified van Kaam's method, an interpretive phenomenological approach utilizes a qualitative analysis software program (e.g., NVivo10®). The data analysis consisted of exploring the experiences of African American women with aspirations of achieving CEO positions.

Chapter 3 also included a review of the research method, design, and rationale, role of the researcher, methodology, issues of trustworthiness, the protection of human participants, and the dissemination of findings. Chapter 4 presents the findings of the study and includes a review of the background, group demographics, analysis, evidence of trustworthiness, and results along with a summation of the research questions.

## Chapter 4: Results

### **Introduction**

In this qualitative phenomenological study, I examined the lived experiences and perceptions of African American women who aspire to become CEOs in corporate America. My goal was to understand the reasons why there continue to be so few African American women CEOs in corporate America, a condition that exists despite their increased presence in executive-leadership positions.

The research questions were as follows:

1. What contributed to the increase of African American women in positions as directors, senior directors, vice presidents, and senior vice presidents in corporate America?
2. How did these factors contribute to the increase of African American women in directors, senior directors, vice presidents, and senior vice president's positions in corporate America?
3. What apparent factors play a part in the lack of African American women in CEO positions in Fortune 500 companies, a part of corporate America?
4. Describe how these factors play a role in the lack of African American women in CEO positions.

In this chapter, I present the findings of this study. In it, I also describe the methods used for recruiting and selecting participants, the process of data collection, and the themes that arose from analyzing the collected data. A review of the setting and background contextualizes the findings.

### **Setting and Background**

It is important to acknowledge the historical setting and the facts surrounding the lived experiences of African American women who work in corporate America to fully understand and contextualize the results of this study. In this qualitative phenomenological study, I examined the perceptions and lived experiences of African American women in middle- to upper-level leadership roles who aspire to CEO positions. Because of issues related to race, sex, and class, African American women have always experienced discrimination regarding advancement opportunities in corporate America (Byrd, 2014; Jean-Marie & Martinez, 2013, Lloyd-Jones, 2014). They have found themselves to be powerless, excluded from networks and, if there is only one African American woman in a leadership position in a predominantly White organization, they will need validation of their skills (Byrd, 2014, Jean-Marie & Martinez, 2013; Stanley, 2009). Also, because of the stereotypical images associated with them, African American women are forced to defend themselves (Byrd, 2014). Gender and racial stereotypes are products of history and culture and exist in many organizations (Stainback & Tomaskovic-Devey, 2012). Although more women have progressed to leadership positions at the executive level in corporate environments, the number of African American women at the CEO level continues to decline (Rosette & Livingston, 2012). In corporate America, African American women are still at the bottom of the ethnic organizational pyramid.

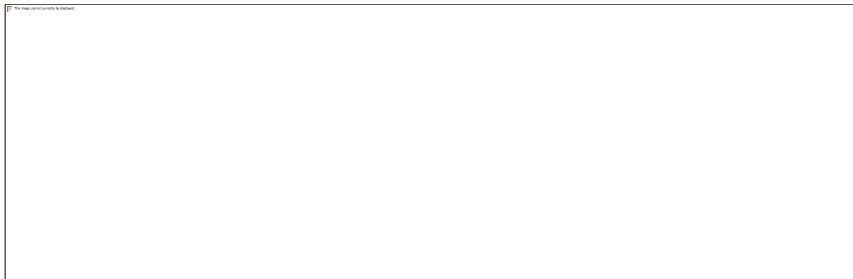
### **Demographic Overview**

A total of 58 women responded to five requests I made through the online professional network LinkedIn to participate in this study. Thirty-nine African American women met the specific requirements (Appendix B) to participate in the study. Of the original 58 African American women who responded, 15 ultimately became participants. To qualify as a participant in this study, respondents from LinkedIn had to satisfy the following criteria:

- Be an African American woman.
- Be at least 35 years of age.
- Possess a minimum of 7 years of experience in a mid- to upper-managerial position at a Fortune 500 company.
- Be willing and able to respond specifically and explicitly on the experiences of African American women attempting to advance to executive and chief executive levels in Fortune 500 organizations.

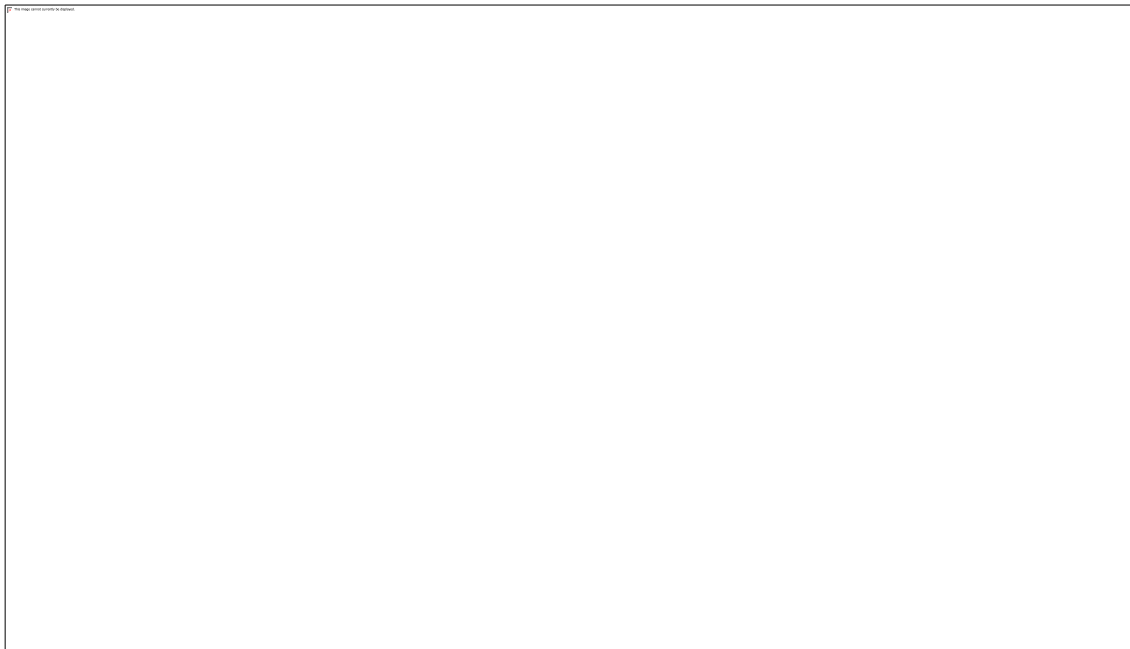
Of the 39 African American women who met the criteria to participate in this study, 18 did not return their informed consent forms, and six, after several attempts to reschedule, did not attend their scheduled interviews. Table 1 displays participant recruitment data.

Table 1

*Summary of Participants: Participated Versus Did Not Participate*

Ultimately, participants included African American women in positions at the mid to upper leadership level, ranging from managers to CEOs of their own companies. This study did not require that participants work in a specific industry. Table 2 illustrates the demographic information of the participants (identities obscured by code names).

Table 2

*Population of Participants in this Study*

## Data Collection

I recruited participants for this study using the professional social networking site LinkedIn. The LinkedIn groups I used to solicit participants included:

- National Association of Negro Business and Professional Women's Clubs Inc. (NANBPWC).
- African American Leadership Program.
- Black Career Women's Network.
- National Black MBA Association (NMBAA).
- LEAN IN AAHA! (African American, Hispanic, and Asian Professional Women).
- Shades of Success.
- Black Professional Women.

Using purposeful sampling, I identified 39 African American women employed as managers, senior managers, associate directors, directors, senior directors, vice presidents, and presidents who aspire to CEO positions in corporate America and invited them to participate in this study. Ultimately, 15 of these women agreed to participate. I interviewed these 15 African American women using the interview protocol and research questions (Appendix D). GoToMeeting high definition video conferencing software was used to conduct the interviews. Each interview lasted between 45 minutes to 1 hour, depending on the length of the responses the participants gave to the open-ended questions. The first month of recruitment for this study, June 2014, came to close without having generated any interest. I submitted an application for permission to expand



recruiting efforts to include Walden University's participant pool, which was approved by the IRB. The recruitment and data collection process took place from May 14, 2014, through October 9, 2014.

Participants who did not return the "I consent" email within 5 days received two additional requests via email asking that they review the informed consent form and reply to the initial email with "I consent." Ultimately, a total of 15 African American women who met the criteria agreed to participate in this study. During the interview process, I asked each participant the central research question and four sub-questions. The interviews lasted between 45 minutes and 1 hour, until additional statements stopped emerging, or when participants terminated the discussion. The interviews discontinued when participants responses reached the point of saturation or no new perceptions or experiences appeared. All 15 participant interviews took place using GoToMeeting HD video conferencing software. Throughout the data collection process, nothing unusual or unexpected happened. All interviewees were willing to participate, did so fully without a problem, and no one dropped out. If anything, there was an unexpected eagerness on the part of the participants to be involved in this study and to tell their story. I used pseudonyms to maintain the confidentiality of each participant's identity. My intent in the interviews was to develop an understanding of what perceived factors contributed to the low number of African American women CEOs in corporate America. Responses to the research questions were grouped and coded according to each research question (see Appendix D).

Transcription of each interview varied from 1 to 10 hours. I asked participants semi-structured, open-ended research questions and, depending on which question was asked, some of the participants' responses contributed a minimal amount of information about their experiences while other participants' responses went beyond the scope of this study. Although some of the replies did not precisely reference the question presented, overall some of the inessential material provided an additional perspective. For example, one participant (AAWL 6) noted, "I'm thinking that those increases in African American women in positions as directors and seniors, and so on, vice presidents, 'if you will,' are still far and few and in between."

I manually recorded and single-typed interview transcripts in Microsoft Word immediately after completing the interviews. The interview transcripts were organized according to each interview question and hand-coded for specific themes around the research questions. The data consisted of 25 pages of transcribed interviews. I used NVivo10 and Microsoft Excel to help organize, sort, and track the frequency of themes from the transcripts. Microsoft Excel made coding and identifying emerging themes and patterns simple. I re-read and validated each transcript for accuracy and entirety. Data collected in this study was stored on a home personal computer and saved as an encrypted file on an external USB drive purchased for this study only.

### **Evidence of Trustworthiness and Credibility**

#### **Credibility**

Credibility is a process that stresses checking, questioning, and theorizing correspondence from the research findings and the real world (Kvale, 1989b, p. 279). To

ensure the credibility of this research study, I manually analyzed data using the seven-step modified van Kaam phenomenological method, the interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA), and NVivo 10. The participants' responses were manually recorded on interview protocols immediately after each interview. The coding process started after the organization of the data, and then I transcribed the interview recordings. To avoid limiting the openness of the primary researcher, the themes were not pre-assigned (see Creswell, 2012). I used notetaking during the interviews to write thick descriptions of participants' responses.

All of the data for this study consisted of stories in the exact words of African American women in mid- to upper-level management positions with experience in corporate environments. Member checking took place by not only having the participants review the analyzed data, but also by having participants verify and confirm that their lived experiences were captured during the interviews. Glaser and Strauss (2014) noted that the relationships between saturation and sample size occurred after collecting the current information of all participants, and there was no additional insight into the phenomenon investigated. This data consisted of the intimate memories of the African American women participants' experiences. I expected that the experiences of the participants would be different; however, their responses concerning their experiences were all quite similar. There was no reason to question the credibility of the data because the participants were very open and direct in sharing their stories.

## **Transferability**

According to Creswell (2012), threats to external validity present themselves when incorrect conclusions are drawn from sample data to other individuals, settings, and current or previous situations. To avoid the threats of external validity, the results of this research study are transferable to other studies and journal articles. The themes revealed in this research study are valuable, and further analysis should take place concerning the possible transferability in areas involving the race, sex, and class of African American women. Areas such as diversity and inclusion initiatives in organizations, including Ivy League vs. Historically Black Colleges and Universities, stereotypes, organizational practices, limited mentoring and networking opportunities, family responsibilities, and limited support systems constitute subjects of value to other organizations. Chapter 5 discusses the possibility of potential research on the themes examined in this study.

## **Data Analysis**

Before starting the data analysis, all the of the researcher's personal and professional experiences, information, viewpoints, and standards was bracketed. Bracketing, or epoch, allowed the lived experiences of the African American women participants who occupy mid to upper-level managerial positions in corporate America to emerge, which ensured that the conclusions were what the participants meant. Minimization of related biases occurred by not building a personal or professional relationship with study participants. The researcher listened to the lived experiences of the participants and asked each participant the same central research question and four sub-questions to avoid interfering with the direction of the responses. None of the

participants changed their responses after the researcher repeated their answers in their interview transcripts. Member checking (participant approval of the interview transcripts) was completed after each interview and before data analysis.

All the transcribed interviews were organized and managed through NVivo10® (computer software program) and Microsoft Excel. NVivo10® assigned codes, facilitating searching for word and text frequency, and attached data to content. As suggested by Creswell (2012), computer software programs like NVivo10® constitute an efficient approach to storing and analyzing qualitative data which makes it easier to eliminate irrelevant data. More than a couple of significant themes were located, and the outcomes appear in tables in this chapter, arranged by research question and reinforced by quotes and narratives voiced by the African American women.

The researcher used the data analysis strategy developed by Moustakas' (1994) modified van Kaam method and the interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA). The modified van Kaam method involves seven separate steps for manually analyzing the interview transcripts. The steps include the following:

1. Horizontalization,
2. Reduction and Elimination,
3. Clustering and Thematizing,
4. Categorizing Themes,
5. Creating Individual Textual Descriptions,
6. Constructing Structural Descriptions, and
7. Developing Composite Descriptions.

## **Data Analysis Strategy**

**Step 1: Horizontalization.** The initial step, horizontalization, involves categorizing and evaluating the descriptive data collected during the participant interview phase and placing the data into groups to organize actual statements (Moustakas, 1994). As indicated by Moustakas (1994), the listing and preliminary grouping include only expressions that are relevant and have the same value relative to the experience. The criteria used in this study for grouping participants' responses were repetitiveness and likeness in meaning and language.

**Step 2: Reduction and Elimination.** The second step, reduction, consists of reducing and eliminating invariant components irrelevant to the lived experiences of African American women who aspire to CEO positions. This step generates themes based on the occurrences essential for portraying the phenomenon if the expressions are clear and separated. In this study, participants' statements are significant and speak sincerely to the phenomenon. Finally, this step involves paying attention to the following: (a) essential statements by participants, (b) statements that appear in multiple times, and (c) interpretations of the meanings obtained.

**Step 3: Clustering and Thematizing.** The third step in the data analysis process, clustering and thematizing, involves coding the related invariant horizons with descriptions that signify patterns and themes. The features and functionality of NVivo10® (computer software) simplified the process of arranging the participant interview transcripts and experiences. The original interview protocols were uploaded and stored in the computer software NVivo10® which made the data easier to access.

Also, because the themes are visible and coded in NVivo10® the data analyzed is well grounded in the text which minimized some of the researcher's biases (Cann, 2015). The emerging invariant themes were clustered and labeled as common themes experienced by the participants that included shared patterns, connections, and similar statements.

**Steps 4 and 5: Categorizing Themes and Creating Textual Descriptions.** The fourth step, categorizing themes, involves checking the invariant components and corresponding themes against each completed transcript; this step clarifies that they were valid and relevant invariant elements and themes (Moustakas, 1994). The fifth step, creating individual textual descriptions, creates the individual textual descriptions of the participants' experiences by using the validated invariant horizons and themes. These textual descriptions are formed by the rich textual descriptions of African American women's lived experience in corporate America.

**Steps 6 and 7: Structural Descriptions and Composite Descriptions.** The sixth step, constructing structural descriptions, consists of developing the structural descriptions that allow the researcher to look below the effect essentials in the participants' experiences. In this study, the researcher constructed structural descriptions of the participants' experiences as African American women, revealing well-hidden meanings. The final and seventh step, developing composite descriptions, involves the interpretation of the meanings. The integrated combined textual and structural descriptions provided a combination of meanings and the essence of the African American women's experiences. This step describes the everyday experiences of the participants and represents the closing act of the phenomenological study concerning the

lack of African American women in CEO positions in Fortune 500 companies.

Composite descriptions tell the reader “what” African American women experienced regarding their lived experiences when aspiring to CEO positions in Fortune 500 companies and describe how they experienced it.

As a qualitative phenomenological study, the lived experiences of African American women aspiring to CEO positions in Fortune 500 companies were examined. The lived experiences of these African American women emerged from the words that were spoken by the participants during their interviews, which explains how and what contributed to their increased representation in executive-level roles over the last 10 years. The words spoken by the participants identified and described how the perceptions of various factors (e.g., race, gender, class) contributed to the continued underrepresentation of African American women CEOs in corporate America. Six major themes and 24 subthemes emerged from the responses to the interview questions. The major themes include (a) race, sex, and class; (b) stereotyping; (c) organizational practices and processes; (d) education; (e) lack of talent development; (f) responsibility of African American women, and (g) Lack of support systems. A comprehensive approach to examining the underrepresentation of African American women among corporate US CEOs concentrated on race, sex, and class. A textured-structural description and interpretation of the expressions used in this research study were given to present the mutual understanding (Moustakes, 1994). The meanings in this study relate to the emerging themes and the thematized categories.



Each research question functioned as a guide to examine the experiences of the African American women attempting to climb the corporate ladder to upper-level managerial positions in corporate America. Interviews with the participants created dialogues, revealing shared experiences and significant factors that contributed to their advancing or not advancing to upper-level managerial positions in corporate America.

### **Identification of Key Themes**

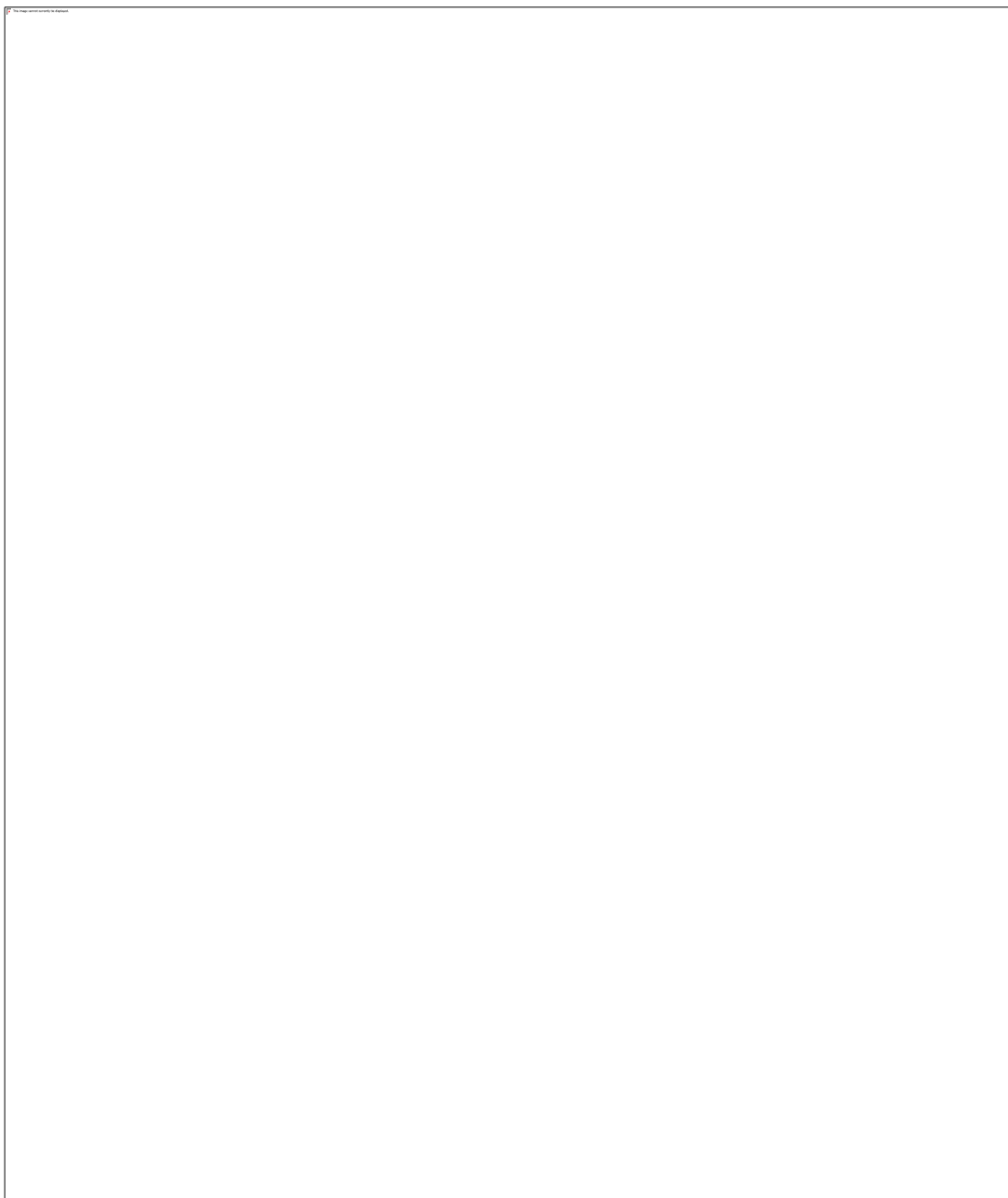
Participants' responses collected during the interview phase of the study were categorized into thematic categories to reveal shared themes that corresponded with the central research question and four sub-questions (Moustakas, 1994). The examination of a hard copy of the interview transcripts resulted in the generation of classified themes for each interview question; this process validated the thematized categories through recognition of key terms. Quotations from the participants were examined for the frequency of the main terms and repeated text, revealing the lived experiences of African American women aspiring to CEO positions in corporate America. The data in this study were examined, re-examined, and analyzed with the awareness that something new or unforeseen could emerge. Then, analysis of the major themes that emerged took place for all 15 interviews, revealing that saturation occurred with the fifteenth participant.

Invariant themes and patterns emerged from participants' accounts of their experiences revealed during the interview process. Participants' shared and pertinent responses were coded and their frequency of appearance recorded. Each participant interviewed answered the two open-ended research interview questions and two sub-questions (Appendix D). The Moustakas (1994) modified van Kaam seven-step method

established the classification of themes. The interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA) and NVivo10® captured additional or overlooked themes collected from participants' stories, perceptions, and feelings about their experiences in corporate America and their aspirations to become CEOs.

Organization of the classified themes followed a categorized structure, with subcategories subsequently emerging from the data. Joining both NVivo10® and IPA provided the researcher with a thorough sense of what the information meant, along with the thoughts and impressions of the participants; the approach enhanced the credibility of the information obtained. Then, detection of emerging themes occurred after the analysis of the thematized categories. Fourteen participants' (93%) responses fell into one of the thematized categories, and over half of the participants' (53%) responses fell into two of the remaining thematized categories. Table 3 displays the thematized categories and key themes revealed by the 15 participants in order of the research questions.

Table 3

*Frequency of Participants Identifying Emergent Themes*

## Study Results

### Research Question 1: Themes

The first research question was “What contributed to the increase of African American women in executive level roles over the last ten years?” According to participants, having organizational support was a key factor in African American women advancing to executive leadership levels over the past ten years. Furthermore, the participants believed that more African American women have obtained college degrees so that they could apply for leadership roles at the executive level. However, the participants also believed that diversity initiatives to improve the number of minorities in leadership positions in organizations was an influential factor in their returning school and advancing in organizations (Table 4).

Table 4

*Research Question 1: What Contributed to the Increase of African American Women in Positions as Directors, Senior Directors, Vice Presidents, and Senior Vice Presidents in US Corporations*



**Theme 1: Organizational Support.** Obtaining organizational support from leaders in the upper levels of leadership was partially responsible for the advancement of African American women into executive-level roles over the past 10 years. Over half of the participants in this research study credited their leadership positions to someone in upper

management who gave them a chance. Having benefited from receiving such a chance, these participants considered themselves extremely fortunate to have received the support of senior-level leaders who recognized their potential, believed in their abilities, and encouraged them to pursue leadership roles at the upper level. One participant noted,

I would say probably the last, “old god” I worked with 3 law firms here in Madison, and I was in a similar position with a commercial real estate company in Chicago, and was the only black person, “period.” I tell people, “maybe it is because I speak the Kings English,” “I do not”, “you know.” However, if you get with the right person that see something in you to give you that encouragement, and you have that internal drive to try to exceed, that helps, that helps a lot. So, it was hard and very difficult, very difficult. (AAWL 1)

Another participant stated,

I have got to the point of where I am in my career not only because I was determined to educate and continued to challenge myself, but there had been white people in positions, and I was fortunate enough that they saw something in me, and encouraged me to keep going. I would say that that is not the norm because I do not see that across the board. (AAWL 2)

Analysis of the data further revealed that doors opened for African American women after African American men had already pried them open with their efforts.

The time, and...., there was kind of a upsurge of African American men moving up the ladder, and that somewhat opened the door for example, Ursula Burns, sisters like that was able to get in, because of brothers, or where it got to a point,

“okay” to let one of us in, and they’ve got a lot of publicity over that, and they’re the ones that’s always shown in the “you know” the majority company. (AAWL 4)

While the participants’ responses revealed doubt about obtaining leadership roles in upper management, the data revealed that Black and Caucasian women occupying leadership positions at the senior level were willing to give Black women a chance at leadership opportunities.

I met a female not of African American descent, but of Caucasian descent that saw my talent, believed in my talent, and was willing to give me that chance. That is how I made it into the executive director position. (AAWL 8)

I can say at my organization, we have a vice president of human resources that is black, she also sits on the board of our company, and I doubt that if she were not in that position, I would have been promoted to where I am in mid management, I would say “senior management. (AAWL 12)

Furthermore, upper-level leaders had to see the potential of African American women in their organizations; a prerequisite for this visibility was that African American women had to be twice as good as their male counterparts before advancing to executive-level positions.

I had been extremely fortunate, except for in very few cases that have upper-level managers see my potential and was able to help me pull up, probably not as fast as they did the guy...., but I was eventually able to pull up. I just had to be twice

as good as the person sitting next to me, as opposed to just being good at what I do like the person next to me and get pulled up. (AAWL 14)

This theme—organizational support—was emphasized by six of the participants (40%). Participants clearly expressed their determination to succeed; if they did not convince leaders at the senior level that they had potential, they would not have obtained organizational support to pursue positions at the leadership level. The participants' perception was that leaders in upper management undermined the individual talents and efforts of African American women, which resulted in participants' emphasizing education and educational attainment as a counterweight to upper management's efforts to undermine them. This emphasis on education leads to the second theme—the need for education.

**Theme 2: The Need for Education.** The data indicated that the participants' education contributed to their obtaining advancement opportunities. Observing that African American women were not advancing to top leadership positions, participants expressed the belief that, by obtaining undergraduate and graduate degrees, they became more promotable and could apply for managerial positions.

Well, I was blessed that tuition reimbursement was available to me. I completed my bachelors and masters with tuition reimbursement assistance with an interest of organizational communication. (AAWL 3)

There was no limit to what African American women would do or sacrifice to educate themselves. Participants recalled having traveled the world so that they could gain knowledge and obtain international experience.

I migrated to the south, in fact, I migrated to the west first, I went to California first, and got some education there, when I came to the south, “you know,” “I made the big triangle, I learned some things along the way, that’s how I got my experience, and I cut my teeth on Washington, D.C. law. Then I went to California, worked in entertainment, watched how they worked, then I went to the south, I have a MBA, I could hardly get a job in the south other than a teacher. (AAWL 6)

The African American women who participated in this study were not wrong in their estimation of the role education plays in corporate advancement. Without an advanced degree, African American women remain in low-level positions in many organizations. Participants in this study earned college degrees to improve their chances of advancing in their organizations and to improve their economic status in society.

More because African American Women have decided to step up to roles or, and in their jobs. More African American Women are deciding they want to go better and further their education so they want to be in that managerial position, and also give themselves something to look forward to, so I think it’s more we’ve, we’ve decided not to always be in the background anymore, we want to be our own bosses, we want to be able to know what it is to be in a higher position, then just being “you know” the middle class anymore. (AAWL 10)

After earning a college degree, the African American women in this study gained a different mindset. Participants expressed their impression that acquiring academic



credentials gave them a higher status in their organizations, making them viable candidates for promotion to any level.

There is an increase in African Americans obtaining higher education, that's one stream, and I think the mindset of those who are obtaining greater prominence an opportunity for them to manifest their academic scholarship puts them in a position to apply for managerial and executive management positions. (AAWL 7)

This theme—the need for education—was emphasized by four of the participants (27%). Without an advanced level of education, African American women will not progress to the top leadership levels in corporate organizations.

**Theme 3: Diversity and Inclusion Initiatives.** In this study, four of the 15 participants (27%) acknowledged that there had been an increase in corporate diversity and inclusion initiatives. However, participants also expressed the belief that this increase only occurred because of clients' insistence, EEO demands, and changes in the culture over time. More specifically, participants insisted that the increased representation of minorities, particularly African American women, was a result of outside forces, not internal ones. The stories told by the participants in this study revealed that, if such outside forces for change had not existed, no increase in the number of African American women executives would have occurred.

I think major companies are being forced by their clients to have more representation that look like the population and their organizations. I think the diversity initiatives are driving that, "to me" it's strictly a business decision. I can't say that this would have happened, or at least even .5 given the number of

African American women that could be in those positions is really a modest increase. (AAWL 2)

That said, an organization and its leadership stood to benefit when they hired or promoted an African American woman to a position at the executive leadership level.

I think the corporate culture has changed, there's more peace in the corporate EEO programs, I believe that because of many instances, promoting a black female fills two spots on the diversity roster if you can find a candidate.

(AAWL 3)

Another perspective expressed by a participant emphasized that African American women had not obtained representation at the executive level until 25 years after diversity and inclusion efforts were implemented.

I got to believe based on my age, I came into the workforce in the early 90's, and that was part of the time that you started to see black women represented in those areas, and I think it's a combination, a combination of diversity and inclusion efforts that's been underway for about the last 25 years, and I think there's a degree of "you know," black women, we tend to be more educated even than our peers, "like other women." "You know, in terms of getting degrees and getting the advanced degrees and things like that." I just think it is the perfect storm of all those things that saw an uptake, or urgency of black women getting into positions directors, senior directors, and vice presidents in corporate America. (AAWL 5)

Simply stated was "diversity." (AAWL 15)

The first two themes revealed that African American women had to receive organizational support and earn college degrees before advancement opportunities became available to them. However, it was also revealed that, before corporate diversity and inclusion initiatives were implemented, African American women did not receive organizational support or help to earn those college credentials. While the data indicated that organizations had changed, and EEO programs have become part of the accepted culture, participants expressed the belief that organizations were forced to increase the number of minorities on their executive leadership teams. The increased number of African American women at the executive level was perceived as strictly a business decision; because African American women happen to be more educated, it was believed to be a win-win. The increase of African American women in positions at the executive leadership level was believed to have occurred because organizations have implemented diversity initiatives. These initiatives made it possible for African American women to return to school; they also began to receive more organizational support and encouragement to pursue positions at the leadership level. The next five themes explain the ways in which organizational support, education, and diversity and inclusion initiatives contributed to increasing the presence of African American women at the executive leadership level over the last 10 years.

Data collected as part of this study revealed the ways in which participants (African American women), in their hearts, always knew they could effectively perform in top leadership roles, believing that they rightfully belonged in positions at the executive leadership level. The emerging themes illustrate how participants overcame

self-doubt, changed jobs, sought professional relationships outside of their organizations, and obtained advanced degrees. These themes also reveal how some organizations were not willing or ready to place African American women in executive-level positions until after they became legally obligated by the government to increase the number of minorities in roles at that level.

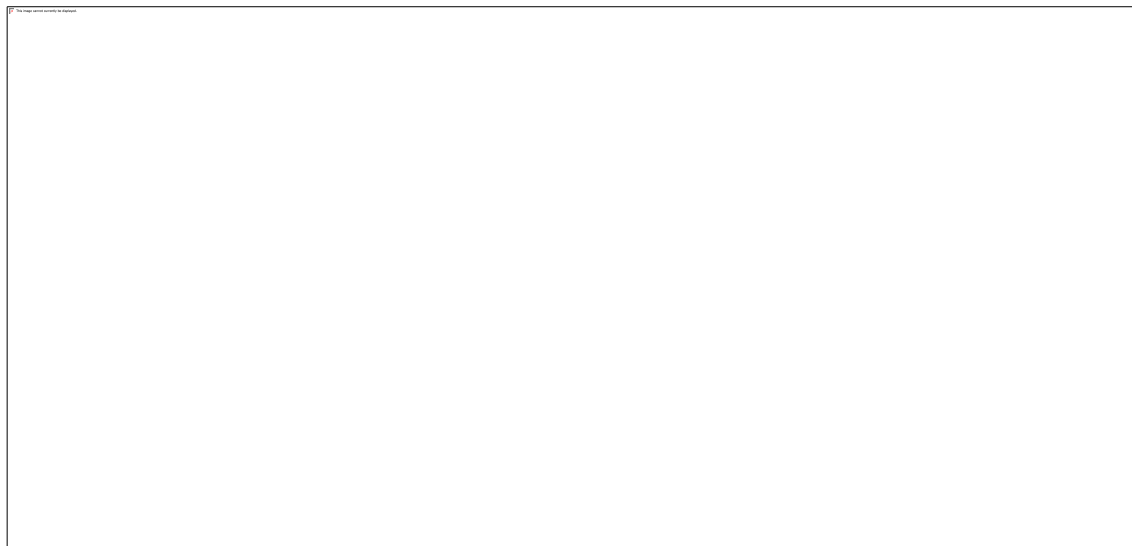
### **Research Question 2: Themes**

The second research question was, “How did these factors contribute to the increase of African American women in directors, senior directors, vice presidents, and senior vice president positions in corporate America over the past 10 years?”

Participants’ responses expressed how organizational support and a higher level of education, along with diversity initiatives, lifted the uncertainty a lot of African American women have about advancing to the executive leadership level. The data revealed that, because more African American women have obtained college degrees, built professional relationships through networking, and changed companies to gain more experience, they are now at an advantage compared to women of other ethnicities when competing for positions at the executive leadership level (Table 5).

Table 5

*Research Question 2: How Did These Factors Contribute to the Increase of African American Women as Directors, Senior Directors, Vice Presidents, and Senior Vice Presidents in US Corporations?*



**Theme 4: Diversity and Inclusion Initiatives.** The experiences related by the participants in this study demonstrate that more opportunities are becoming available to African American women who have accepted and are comfortable with who they are. According to the African American women who participated in this study, African American women behaved in ways that they believed met organizational standards, but they also revealed that organizational leaders were often unsure of their talent or them as individuals.

So you yourself have to conduct yourself in such a way that you navigate this corporate terrain, still being yourself, still being authentically who you are, but at the same time sometimes educating others as they encounter you. (AAWL 1)

Participants also recognized that, because of fear and intimidation, they were not pushing back against unfair decisions that limited their chances of advancing. The perception was that, psychologically and emotionally, African American women do not believe they deserve top leadership positions as their ideas have been consistently discounted in corporate decision-making. African American women often do not know their own level of expertise and open themselves up to criticism.

So it took me, see I'm almost 60 years old, so it's taken awhile (laughter). And now, I'm almost to a point of retiring, I feel like, "I'm not going to say "arrived" because I am not going to arrive until I die, but I could see the benefit of the time that I put in, pushing back a little bit, or, not being afraid, and growing out of this intimidation, because, again, a lot of that was me. So, it's going through that whole food chain, and it's a mindset really, it's a mindset, a part of the mindset is not only on the corporations, part of the mindset is on us, sometimes we feel intimidated as if we have not earned a place at the table, and you have to be, I've been in positions where I've been in executive committee meetings and given my role, I should almost have equal input. I worked with law firms for the last 15 years and I should have equal input into decision making, and I would come up with an idea and it's quickly dismissed. But the white guy at the end of the table would say exactly the same thing, and then it's "ole my gosh," what a wonderful idea. (AAWL 2)

It's how you walk into the arena, if you walk into the arena with your head down, and that you're seeing some validation that you have something to offer, than you

open yourself up for a lot of criticism. Again, I think it is about you, about yourself in that position, do you have a right to be in that position? Are you qualified to be in that position? Alternatively, do you think someone should give you that position because you want it that is the dynamic. If you're influencing someone at a level that they want to work for you, that they want to follow you, and whoever is observing you if they are in corporate America will see that you have the level of competency, academic competency, industry knowledge for someone to want to follow you, and for someone to hire you so that you can provide that level of leadership. (AAWL 7)

I also think it is a change of attitude when it comes to, for me in particular, I know my value. (AAWL 11)

The data collected in this study revealed the competence and efficiency of the African American participants. The perception expressed by participants indicated that these traits—competence and efficiency—prompted organizational leaders to, apprehensively, promote African American women to positions of power.

We know we are capable, and we are set up to do these things, and we have the strength of courage, character, and all this stuff, but other people are threatened by that. I think at some point we have to just own it, it's not like we have to accept it, but there is just no reason why certain things is the way they are, certain systems are set up the way they are. The white male dominated system consists of the economy, politics, I don't care if President Obama is at the top, and we still have white men running the show. It's just the way this country is set up (AAWL 4)

Data also showed how easy it is for African American women to perform successfully in positions at the top leadership levels. However, some African American women expressed equanimity with having authority that is unofficial; such authority is generated by high competency coupled with limited opportunities to advance to upper leadership positions.

Getting to where I am now from where I was, entry level or as I brought myself up, I pretty much just claimed it. I was at a place, I guess it was a starter position, so I said, listen, I already do this, let me do this, I already do this, “you know,” it was to this point it’s been kind of, “I don’t want to say easy, “but there hasn’t been that much push back. They were in a kind of dire straits when I came in there, “there Marketing was just a mess, so, “you know,” it was easy for me to come and prove myself, show what I can do, and show results quick, and, even help grow the company to a point where we’ve changed. I’ve doubled and tripled digit the percentage growth success, and, it’s just that last point, “I just can’t make that step, and I’m not quite sure why, or how to get there. (AAWL 13)

So, again, I kind of go back too, “you know,” being the person, I’m considered a natural leader, where some people have the title that says you’re the manager, or you’re the director, or you’re the VP, “you know,” I kind of have that natural role, I never personally wanted to have that role, the title, but I wanted the power. I figured that I am running everything and the title didn’t matter to me, I only felt the value in the title itself later in life when I really understood what it meant, before it didn’t mean anything to me. It was like “I’m doing everything I want,



they have given me control over this and that, I just realized the pay and the prestige, and respect that came along with the title until later on. (AAWL 14)

This theme—diversity and inclusion initiatives—emerged in seven of the 15 participants (47%). Participants revealed how, individually, they skillfully and courageously pursued positions at the executive leadership level. Although they trust African American women, organizational leaders of the dominant culture also are apprehensive about awarding these women the respect, prestige, and pay that comes with upper-level leadership positions. African American women may have control over many things, but they struggle to maneuver through corporate America because Caucasian men are still running the show.

**Theme 5: Legally Obligated.** Data collected in this study showed that the increase in African American women at the executive leadership level is tied to requirements instituted by the federal government. Organizations are keeping up with government regulations related to diversity and inclusion. By slightly increasing the number of African American women in executive leadership positions, organizations remain legally compliant.

A lot of it is government driven. If you are a government contractor, the government is probably one of the highest vendors for most businesses. The government regulates that you have to reach out to diverse populations, not just racially diverse, but veteran status, women, you have to do that if you want to do business. So, the initiatives are, again, they are strictly government driven, people want a piece of that huge pie, and in order to do so, and that's even with local

municipalities, you have to show where you at least try and pull in diverse populations, and if you don't you could lose your contract, or not even be awarded a contract. And there are probably some forward thinking companies out there that see the benefit of diversity in the workforce, but, it's very slow moving, very slow moving. (AAWL 2)

The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) established regulations that made it hard for organizations to deliberately conceal the number of African American women at the executive leadership level. Participants expressed the belief that, without EEO programs and the possibility of a loss of revenues, African American women would continue to experience racial discrimination in employment decisions.

I think before we really had EEO programs that actually had teeth, many things were swept under the rug as in employment decisions when they were actually blatant discrimination. They could no longer hide us really. It took a little bit more, if you were trying to be dishonest," I'll say for lack of a better word" it took a little bit more work because you had so many people looking to make sure you had the mandatory guidelines, and you had quite a few people looking to see that those guidelines were being followed. Of course there were penalties depending on the type of penalty you can incur, economic penalty. But you can also incur loss of good will, which is ten times worth more to you concerning consumers than, it the counterpart of getting customers. (AAWL 3)

The data also revealed that the presence of African American women at the executive leadership level was carefully planned. More specifically, there was a belief expressed

that the EEOC demanded that organizations open its doors to African American women at the executive leadership level.

I think that over the last 25 years there has been an intentional effort to outsource intuitive, and put some things behind the EEOC demands that we got in the 70's, "right?" equal opportunity, but we all know there has to be an effort put in place. I believe that by the time I got into the workforce I was seeing the results of probably the 20 years prior of EEOC diversity and inclusion initiatives, and efforts that were being put out there to try to open up doors and recruit and retain people of color and women of color particularly. (AAWL 5)

Unexpectedly, the data revealed how CEOs and executive leaders finally have come to value diversity in their organizations. Chief executive officers who value diversity initiatives changed how African American women think, contributing to the acknowledgment of their value.

I think it is a combination of two things., I think it is that organization are now seeing the value of diversity in the work place., you're hear more and more about diversity initiatives, diversity departments, just diversity and inclusion, particularly in Fortune 500 companies, CEO's, executive leaders, finally recognized and more should that there is value in diversity, and that includes not only African American and African American women, but all individuals of color. (AAWL 11)

This theme—legally obligated—emerged in the interviews of four of the 15 participants (27%). The impact of federal regulations on hiring practices related to

diversity contributed to the explanation concerning why more African American women have leadership titles and why so many returned to school. African American women appear more likely to advance to executive leadership levels in organizations with diversity programs, and, because of this, participants believed that they were valued and, in turn, started valuing themselves. The perception was that these diversity initiatives, coupled with an advanced education, improved participants' chances of progressing in their companies.

**Theme 6: At an Advantage with Education.** The sixth theme is associated with the belief expressed by some participants that advanced degrees open doors to executive-level positions. Data revealed that some organizations have established tuition reimbursement programs and connect these programs to mentoring systems; these efforts demonstrate to the EEOC that companies are making a genuine effort to comply with federal regulations. One participant emphasized how organizational policies dictate that mentoring opportunities were limited to those African American women who were making progress toward a bachelor's degree or higher.

I know at least in my company that I was employed by, "the tuition reimbursement program was part of an overall mentoring system." So, once you got to a certain point and made satisfactory progress towards your degree, you were allowed to select from a group of volunteers for mentors, which was designed to help you put the education you were getting to the best possible use by helping you become promotable, and promoted into the higher level positions. I think the EEOC was more open to this. (AAWL 3)

Advancement opportunities for African American women have increased on the campuses of both Ivy League and historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs). The perceptions of the participants in this study were that, in corporate environments, African American women with degrees from Ivy League schools advanced faster than those from HBCUs.

There are a representative number of African American women of course in colleges and universities that are historically black colleges and universities, but this same basic group do not excel to that extent, and let's say "Ivy league colleges and colleges of significance okay," you still have one or two, a few people like Melissa Harris Perry, you know she's a college professor at Princeton, perhaps you've heard of her, seen her shows, "you know," on MSNBC (verify this), then you have a few other women who are making significant strides in the media, man their jumping off the hook in media, but African American women in corporate America, they're still the last ones on the totem pole, "if you will," I'm just being real with you from a culture perspective. So, they're going to be the last ones invited to the table at a Wall Street restaurant where actually deals are made. (AAWL 6)

I'm coming from an exposure to corporate America that is very brand and name conscious, I'm coming with Ivy League degrees, more than one and that's significantly, significantly aided me in my move up the corporate ladder for many of the jobs I've held. I definitely see that as playing a big factor at one of the major fortune 500 company where I used to work. I saw during their recruitment

process their graduate interns, I saw that they inclusively recruit from the top Ivy League schools, and they somehow did not find any black candidates. And, when I went around saying “hey” I know nothing but African Americans with PhD’s, I was told that, “well they don’t live here or “we can’t find them,” and there was a real sense that there was no need to do more than they were doing, which is reaching out to the Ivy league schools. I think it’s a disadvantage when you are being compared to people with these degrees. (AAWL 9)

This theme—at an advantage with education—appeared in three of the 15 participant’s (20%) interviews, revealing how several African American women with advanced college degrees advanced to upper-level leadership positions. Data revealed the ways in which organizational policies affiliated with educational programs to determine if African American women received help with advancing in organizations. Furthermore, data also revealed that African American women’s obtaining their college degree was an influential factor in their professional trajectories. Having an education is the one thing that participants believed help them to cross organizational barriers. Most African American women do not have the necessary knowledge and skills to attain positions at the top levels of leadership in their current organizations. When necessary, to obtain these skills and knowledge, African American women have changed companies and moved to different cities or states to increase their options for professional advancement, which leads to the next theme.

**Theme 7: Changing Companies.** Two of the 15 participants (13%) expressed the belief that African American women had to be flexible if they wanted to advance in their

professions. Participants also believed that the only reason they obtained leadership positions was that they were able to bring to their organizations skills and knowledge learned at their previous organizations. Accepting a position at a new organization often meant moving to another city or state.

I think that it has been meant in many instances where if I felt stuck, or in the wrong kind of organization, in a place where I felt I couldn't drive, I had a lot of flexibility more so than many other women to move, leave, to quit, to start expanding my vision beyond the city, or the company where I was based. And I think that is something typically men do and women don't, especially African American women who have extended families with which they are in contact or feel they are connected. I think it's a bigger decision and a lot more difficult.

Factors contributing to my moves has only been performance, project performance, changing companies more frequently than many, other professionals have done. You're always using men as a baseline, and as you get older men tend to be less constrained by family, family related concerns that might tie them to geography or to a particular job salary, so as a woman it's very very unusual. For me to be in a position where I am very flexible geographically, I have a partner who spent a lot of time in the role, again, partner at home, much more flexible timing in childcare and children and so forth, that's more often the case.

(AAWL 9)

As I progressed in my career, and the only reason I was able to progress in my career is because I left and went to other companies, and at each company you learn something new every time, you grow as you get older. (AAWL 11)

This theme—changing companies—was unusual for African American women with responsibilities as mothers and, in some instances, spouses. Participants noted that their talents were rarely developed in their corporate organizations. An effective response to this problem involved accepting a position at a new company, a decision that can entail moving to another city or state. However, taking a new job in a new city or state may be more challenging for African American women than it is for men because of limited spousal support or limited support systems at home.

**Theme 8: Professionally Builds Relationships.** Three of the 15 participants (20%) noted how building professional relationships with decision makers helped them to obtain leadership positions. However, data revealed that other issues still keep African American women from advancing to executive leadership positions.

I think things have gotten better because I started going out on my own, instead of waiting, I would go to local networking events that had to do with Marketing, but not necessarily my business specifically, and I would talk to people, and learn more about other things, and their interaction with me wasn't different, it wasn't strained, it wasn't hard. So at that time I started realizing that it's not me, it's them. It's not my inability to network, or talk, or serve, I even presented in some instances. And I made the point to come back and share my experience with them. "By the way, I went to such and such place the other night, had a great time, met



so and so.” So, it was almost like it was confirmation for them that I could actually go out and talk to people on my own. So, it’s been interesting to watch. (AAWL 3)

The other thing is networking relationships are like profoundly important, “I do not burn bridges, “even if there is someone that I think, you know what, “this person is very self-involved and arrogant, I just learn from them, I don’t exclude myself from these people, I look at them, and I even learn “okay these are the outcomes that this type of personality gets, and I just try to be better. Making sure you have a good network of people, don’t discount anyone, “you know,” no big “I’s” no little “U’s, everybody is important. (AAWL 12)

When they became familiar with senior executives, some participants found that they advanced more easily and quickly to leadership positions. These responses also demonstrate how African American women do not go beyond lower and middle management positions if executives from senior levels do not recognize and appreciate their efforts.

Number one, whenever I got someplace, I always took a lay of the land, I figured out who I needed to know to network with to try to showcase myself, and showcase my talent, and almost every place was, I found a way to make sure senior executives knew who I was, knew what I was doing, and as you could imagine, that’s not always appreciated by everyone, “you know,” cause people kind of want you to wait your turn, or wait until an opportunity kind of comes to you, and I’ve always felt that that was not something I could leave to chance, that

I had to manage it, and I never made it in my 19 years of working, I never made it out of middle management. (AAWL 5)

This theme—professionally builds relationships—emphasizes how African American women increased the likelihood of their obtaining upper-level leadership positions when they stopped waiting for invitations to attend informal networking events and became more proactive in building professional networks. Some senior executives overlook African American women and do not invite them to networking events, which limits their access to the decision makers who appoint candidates to leadership positions. For this reason, African American women need to build relationships with leaders at all levels if they wish to advance up the corporate ladder.

**Theme 9: Initially Received Help.** Two of the 15 participants observed that African American women could not obtain leadership positions unless someone already in upper-management was willing to help them. They believed this help was necessary because, on their own, they did not have the right “pedigree.”

So the pedigree, while some of us do have it because the role we have to play, it’s just not something they could imagine making happen. Somebody would have to step out the box. I believe they’re saying, they’re allowing us that land of notoriety and prestige. But we don’t have the longevity enough to have the support necessary to move up. I believe another piece of that is President Obama has given them the fear factor, now that we somehow may feel empowered, and feel that it’s okay for us to move up like that, but it really isn’t. There is no place

for us at that level, and white men will never see us at a point that they would want to report to us. (AAWL 4)

The data also revealed that, despite how organizations may appear when they have African American women on their boards of directors, African American women do not advance to the boardroom unless someone who is already a board member reaches back to bring them in.

A few black women who make corporations look good, even then, I'm not saying that these are not powerful women, powerful sisters who actually had the capacity to do whatever it is they do, but it was somebody who reached back and brought them up. It was not a lot of space for a lot of some bodies to come into senior directors, vice presidents, senior executives, and so on. Of course unless we start our business and that is on the rise. (AAWL 6)

In this theme—initially received help—participants confirmed that African American women do not obtain executive leadership positions unless they receive help from other executive leaders. The fact that organizational leaders of the dominant culture do not think about African American women when positions at the executive level become available explains the low number of African American women who are CEOs.

The eight themes correspond to how African American women have improved their chances of advancing in corporate America. These themes also revealed the obstacles that limit the number of African American women in positions at the CEO level. Despite the skills and qualifications that they bring to corporate America, African American women did not advance to the executive leadership level until after the US

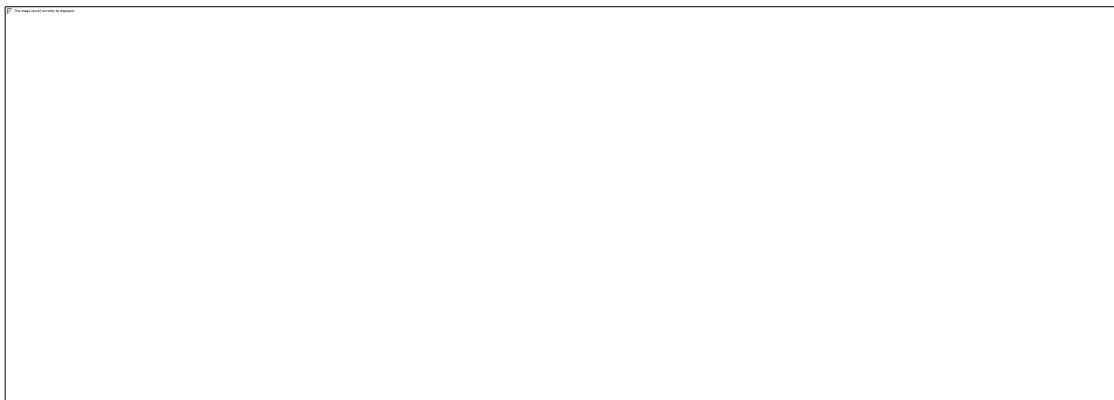
government, along with customers, required corporations to increase the number of minorities on their leadership teams. So, over the past 10 years, the slight growth in the number of African American women at the executive leadership level was driven by the government and their customers. Because more organizations have implemented diversity initiatives, major organizations appear to support shrinking the race and gender gap at the executive leadership level. Their motives remain suspect; corporations appear to have only increased the number of African American women in executive leadership positions to avoid a loss in revenues and government penalties.

### **Research Question 3: Themes**

The third research question was “What apparent factors play a part in the lack of African American women in chief executive officer positions in Fortune 500 companies, a part of corporate America?” Participants believed that having an education, experience, diversity initiatives, organizational support, government requirements, making connections with key members of their organizations helped African American women advance to executive levels. Still, these positive developments were not enough to move them into CEO roles. African American women still experience racism, sexism, and stereotyping in organizations that are grounded in the dominant culture; these experience discourage African American women from pursuing roles at the CEO level because of the professional obligations connected to that role (Table 6).

Table 6

*Research Question 3: What apparent Factors Play a Part in the Lack of African American Women in Chief Executive Officer Positions in Fortune 500 Companies?*



**Theme 10: Racism and Sexism.** Six of the 15 participants (40%) mentioned racism and sexism in their narratives. Participants indicated that, because of their gender, African American women's leadership skills and ability to serve as CEOs mostly go unrecognized. When African American female leaders are recognized for their abilities, they are labeled as "unfeminine" and "masculine."

I would say, just how we're viewed by other females, how we are viewed by our families....we are viewed as less feminine." I'll never forget Sojourner Truth speech when she pulled down her bra and said, "Ain't I a woman." A lot of times because we do operate at this level our femininity is questioned, "I'll like to say," our femininity is hard for people to define because most people don't want to really give honor, or even recognize feminist strength. (AAWL 1)

Data revealed that societal norms and the mindsets of African American women keep them on the bottom of organizational pyramids.

I think part of it is, just like the hierarchy, you have the white men, and if you don't have enough white men, then you have the black men, then if you don't have enough black men, then you go to white woman, and if you don't have enough white women, then you end up with us. So, it's going through that whole food chain, and it's a mindset really, (AAWL 2)

Also, the dominant culture has a higher level of comfort with Caucasian women than African American women, leading to fewer advancement opportunities for African American women in organizations with diversity initiatives.

I think it goes back to those same efforts. I think white women have been the chief beneficiaries of those diversity efforts, because women in general are part of the protected class, and I think there was a higher comfort level with white women than there was with black women in corporate America. (AAWL 5)

Participants observed that African American not only experience racism and sexism, but organizations even use their age as a reason for not offering them positions as CEOs.

I have not only experienced the racism and sexism, but also, but this is a term "ageism because I am young, more than anything, that may be my biggest challenge. (AAWL 11)

Also, African American women receive fewer advancement opportunities to CEO positions than men, which further limits their visibility.

But we don't have the longevity enough to have the support necessary to move up, and I believe they're saying, they're allowing us that land of notoriety and prestige. There is no place for us at that level, and white men will never see us at a point that they would want to report to us. (AAWL 4)

I think it's because it's still a man's world, and the "whole," you know "the boys club," where you literally have to fight to make yourself get to that position. I think that the workforce hasn't seen enough of us, and they don't believe there's enough of us that can run positions like that, so that probably why it's so stagnant as where it is, that none of or, most people haven't been able to move forward and try to get to that fortune 500 "you know position," so it's more, I think it's still because it's looked at as a man's world, and only men could be in positions like that. (AAWL 13)

This theme—racism and sexism— was sometimes joined by a third source of discrimination—ageism. Because of issues related to race and sex, some participants observed that they do not fit the image of what society thinks a leader should look like and that organizations deny African American women positions as CEOs for this reason. Because of negative perceptions and stereotypes, African American women are seen in a different light than Caucasian men and women, as well as African American men.

**Theme 11: Stereotypes.** Four of the 15 (27%) participants indicated that, because of racism and sexism, African American women are subjected to the negative stereotypes that the dominant culture has assigned to them. African American women must grapple with these negative stereotypes that contribute to their not being considered for CEO

positions. The data showed that, according to participants' experiences, male perceptions of females made the attainment of CEO positions quite challenging. Participants expressed the belief that organizational leaders of the dominant culture are not ready to see African American women in leadership positions at the senior management level.

I think this is new to them. For that reason, I think we as females also understand that if it is new for us, it is new for them as well. See, you cannot always expect them to view you in a larger context. (AAWL 1)

Because they are perceived as angry and aggressive, African American women are seen as using aggression to get ahead of other management candidates.

If a black female show up at the bar for drinks after work and this is not a spot normally attended by African Americans, she stands out like a sore thumb.

Everybody tends to know why she's there, and the perception is not that she's there to network or get to know her counterparts she works with, she's trying to get the ups on her competition. (AAWL 3)

Because of the labels placed on African American women, they have to work harder than other men and females of different races and nationalities to prove that they were not what the dominant culture perceived them to be.

I think that what hurts us is the reputation of the black woman as being angry. Therefore, we have to do three times as much as the next woman and ten times as much as the next man. In addition, until the decision makers and board of directors see that and understand that, there will continue to be low numbers. We walk in the door and there is instantly a label placed on us, and whereas others



when they walk through the door they just have to prove their worth, and show that they are great employees and are knowledgeable in things. We not only have to do that, but show that we are not ghetto, angry, loud, have a lot of children, and “you know,” “unwed,” and things, all those negative labels, so we have to do three times as much as the next woman and ten times as much as the next man. And until the decision makers and board of directors see that and understand that....., there will continue to be low numbers. (AAWL 11)

The dominant culture characterizes African American women as aggressive.

As an African American woman there’s already a stigma that we are aggressive. I have learned to do is, just do what I know is right, understand that people have sensitivities to that. (AAWL 12)

This theme—stereotypes—revealed that African American women continue to experience traditional stereotyping in organizations dominated by Caucasian men. The fact that the dominant culture is not accustomed to or ready to view African American women in settings other than those with which they are familiar has made African American women hesitant about pursuing positions at the CEO level. Because of negative stereotypes, African American women do not compete on a level playing field with men when competing for similar CEO positions.

**Theme 12: Hesitancy of African American Women.** Four of the 15 participants (27%) noted that African American women hesitate to pursue CEO positions. Participants indicated that, because of the competition, they were not competitive as candidates for CEO positions as they are not in the same class with candidates who already have much

higher salaries than they do.

There are a great number of us who are coming up now, but, we are not becoming executives of corporations because the is high, you have to make a lot of money to get in the door. So it all comes back to the same thing, “self-sufficiency.” So these are the factors that play a role in the lack of women. They have to be more assertive, they are not assertive enough, there not enough of them in mass, there not enough of them.. (AAWL 6)

Date collected during the participants’ interviews also revealed that African American women with children hesitated to pursue top leadership positions and eventually changed their career paths. In competitive corporate cultures, women with families are often seen as a burden and mothers are viewed as less productive than men (with or without children). This stereotype is even more damaging to African American women who are candidates for top leadership positions at organizations that do not have policies and practices that support work-life balance. This toxic combination of negative stereotypes regarding working mothers and inadequate work-life support policies have made it harder for African American women to continue their climb up the corporate ladder.

If that’s truly what you want, but understand what you giving up, because these CEO’s , “you know,” that’s the one thing that I really don’t aspire to do. What I wanted to do is get to a position where I can make a difference, and the CEO could make a difference, but I don’t need the rest of the hassle. (AAWL 2)

You have to decide if that's what you want. I really believe for me personal experiences have changed my thoughts, if I would have had this conversation with you say 5 years ago, I would have told you, I would be CEO of x, y and z by this such and such a date, but due to life changing events, I have come to learn that good quality of life is more important. So, "you know," the higher I go up the ladder, people think you work less, you actually don't work less, you work more, the stress level is more, everything that comes along with that title and that paycheck is more. If you have a family, "you know," that's a real hard decision, if that organization and the culture of that organization doesn't allow you to do both, and really flexible, being successful is hard to do. and so "you know," like I said, life changing events for me changed my mind about what I considered or where I wanted to be in the next 5 to 10 years. (AAWL 14)

Even in fields dominated by women, African American women encounter challenges when attempting to move into CEO positions. The perception of participants was that factors such as are keeping American American women out of these roles and contributing to their abandoning their goal of obtaining a position at the CEO level.

Talking to a high up woman within that organization who happened to be a black woman, I asked how long she had worked for the agency and what has been her experience, and she said "you know," she said it was difficult, even though that's a majority "I want to did. It could have been many factors, "you know," she didn't specifically go into detail like it could've been that that, it could have been racism, could have been no job openings, could have been a hiring freeze, could

have been various things, but apparently she wanted to achieve that level so she kept at it. If that's what she wanted to achieve, however she wanted to get there was fine with me, it didn't affect me one way or the other. I saw her drive for wanting to succeed there, but that wasn't my ambition. (AAWL 15)

This theme—hesitancy of African American women—revealed that African American women are hesitant to pursue CEO positions because of the difficulties involved in achieving their desired level of success. African American women are choosing a better quality of life over the barriers that keep them from advancement opportunities that lead to CEO positions.

**Theme 13: Too Many Responsibilities.** Three of the 15 participants (20%) suggested that, because most have families or are single parents, African American women cannot handle the pressure and scrutiny that comes with CEO roles. The perception was that working hard was not an option for African American women, despite their desire to continue climbing the corporate ladder.

I don't want to make it seem like it's a bad thing, but it's a challenging thing, and you have to be very very strong to sircumber through some of the pressures once you get to that level. So, I guess the first thing, do you want to do it? How bad do you want to do it? And do you know what it is going to take to get you there? And, I think that's the thing, because of the scrutiny that you'll have to be under, a lot of people can't take that, they just can't, and they don't want to put their family through that type of scrutiny. So, just go into it with your eyes wide open, and if that's what you want, go for it

(AAWL 2)

Data indicated that African American women had to choose between their careers and their families and most African American women chose their families over their career aspirations. Participants expressed the belief that African American women are tired and have become discouraged regarding their career goals because they have been fighting for so long.

I did my best to climb that ladder, and for me it wasn't hard, but I felt that it cost me more than I wanted to pay, "you understand." Number one, I was missing out on my children, because there was so many things that I could not participate in because I was doing something for the company at the same time there was an event at school, it just basically came down to what is your choice going to be?

(AAWL 3)

Here's what happened, in my particular case, I've perhaps have been "you know," one of these women, your plate get so full, you have so much responsibility, a lot of us are single mothers, have numerous things on our plates, "right"? At some point and time, I'm almost sixty, at some point and time you get tired of fighting the rat race, so many of us have lost our faith, and we have fallen off our path, to some extent a lot of us have so much baggage that we are not getting mass, "be in mass," we are not in mass pursuing executive positions at the rate of white males.

(AAWL 6)

This theme—too many responsibilities—corresponds to the idea that, because of high performance expectations at the CEO level, African American women's career

aspires are sidelined due to personal responsibilities at home. The fact is that African American women will work their way up from the bottom in organizations. However, the sacrifices required by their families along with the demands of high-level leadership positions cause African American women to pull out the race for CEO positions. Participants asserted that, for them, it is impossible to excel professionally and personally at the same time.

**Theme 14: Their Upbringing.** Three of the 15 participants (20%) believe that African American women's near non-existence as CEOs relates to their upbringing. Participants described the perception that the desire to become a CEO in the dominant culture was unrealistic for an African American girl. African American girls are not encouraged to follow their dreams, so they grow up believing that only Caucasian women succeed at the top leadership levels.

I grew up on the south side of Chicago, and, "you know," "we had our place," and this unstated thing, "you know," this is what we do," this you know is what we do! We can expect to be a teacher, or we can expect to be something else, I didn't really have a lot of support, "how should I put it?" people encouraging me to reach for the stars. "You know," it was to do, the, my family, and we're talking cousins and stuff, they were teachers, they went into teaching, and I wanted to be a teacher too, but I thought you know there are so many things going on in the school system and they don't make any money. It's not all about money, but that was part of it, I wanted a challenge, I wanted to grow, and when I look at T.V. and I see, aww, I hate to compare us, and, the white woman that have this that and

the other, or families, or the white families that have this that and the other, I just said to myself, why can't I have that?, Why can't I have it? So it took me, see I'm almost 60 years old, so it's taken a while. (AAWL 2)

Well, well I think a little bit has to do with our culture, I also think it has a lot to do with our environment, the way were raised, what we were told as we grow up, what we can do. I was always taught that I can do anything I wanted to do, "period." That I was equal as any other person standing next to me, and I full heartedly believe that, "period." So, even to this day when I walk into a conference room, even if I'm smiling and I don't say a word, I have a presence in that room, and that's just because of the way I was raised to believe, "I can do it," and so I think it's different when somebody, it is constantly instilled in you, or, as opposed to, "you get it later on, I think it could work both ways, but my experiences, I have always been taught that. (AAWL 14)

This theme—their upbringing—revealed that many African American women are not told as children that they can do anything they want once they became adults. In the past, African Americans had to "know their place" and were informed about "the unstated thing." African American girls learn that, because of their race, African American women do not have the same opportunities as Caucasian women.

**Theme 15: Lack of Mentors.** Three of the 15 participants (20%) noted that the lack of mentors contributes to African American women not advancing to CEO positions. Without mentors, African American women do not get the proper guidance needed to succeed.

I think that, I had worked and had a lot of mentors in the organizations of various ethnicities and gender....., and ....., back rounds across the company, and they have all given me the talk and the dance about, “you know,” you’re awesome, you’re doing great, “you know,” you’re “you know,” you’re definitely a future leader of the company. I’ve been awarded and acknowledged for that, but what they did is just take my output, they did not open a door, they did not offer an opportunity. (AAWL 9)

I think a lot has to do with the mentorship in organizations. I am, like I said my background is in engineering, I’m an ops girl through and through, I’m very strong ops leader, and in this world you don’t have a lot of females to help guide you from a corporate standpoint, just as a succession plan. (AAWL 13)

Data revealed that not all African American women feel disadvantaged in their organizations because they did not have mentors. The perception was that the lack of a mentor made getting ahead just a little bit harder.

My experience, there were no mentors, I wouldn’t say it, may it hard, but it made it difficult. Oh well, after a while I moved on to something else (laughter), I felt corporate America, academics, and the military (AAWL 15).

This theme—lack of mentors—revealed how limited access to mentors affected African American women’s attainment of positions at the CEO level. The lack of mentoring deprived African American women of guidance and this made navigating corporate culture and politics more difficult for them.



Data collected during participant interviews revealed that racism and sexism, stereotypes, hesitancy of African American women, too many responsibilities, their upbringing, and the lack of mentors contribute to the paucity of African American women CEOs in corporate America. African American women hesitate to pursue these roles because they wish to avoid being stereotyped regarding race and sex as well as the pressures inherent in balancing work and home responsibilities. The upbringing of African American women is an influential factor in their lack of mentors who resemble them. As children, many African American women are told that, because of their race, they cannot grow up to be CEOs; this dream can come true only for Caucasian girls and boys. Because so few African American women pursue executive and CEO positions in corporate organizations, very few African American women CEOs or top executives are available to serve as mentors.

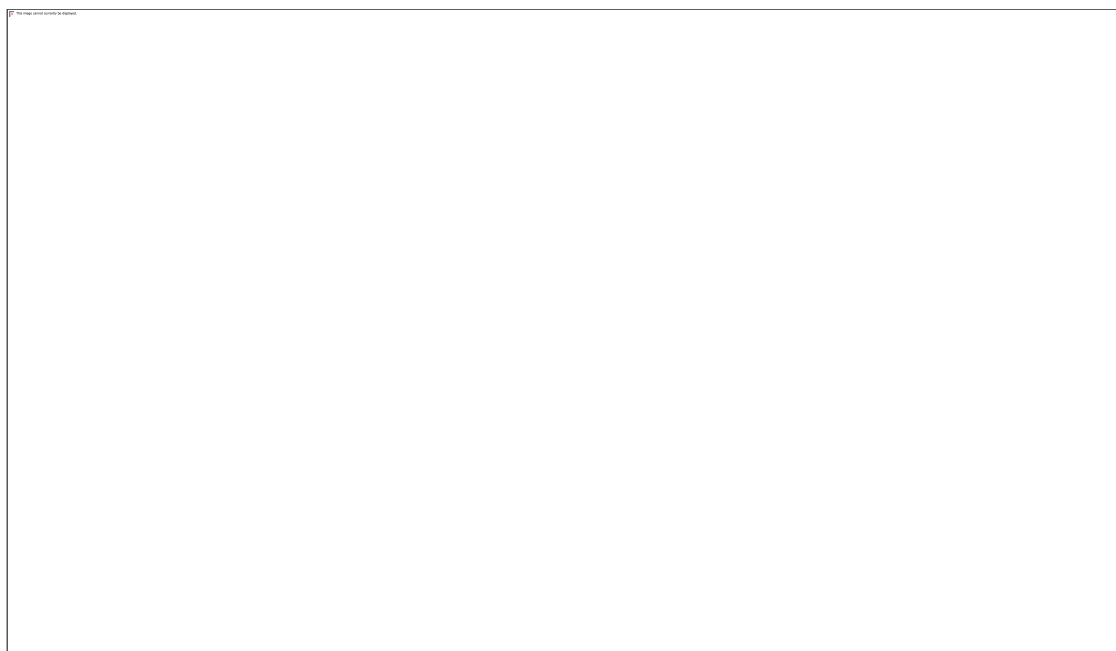
#### **Research Question 4**

The fourth research question was “Describe how these factors play a role in the lack of African American women in chief executive officer positions.” The participants described how cultural differences influenced the already low number of African American women progressing to leadership positions at the executive level. According to the participants, the dominant culture is described as having preconceived notions about African American women being aggressive or acting like men when in leadership positions. Furthermore, the participants described CEO positions as male dominant roles that create an extreme culture of competition that encourages the theft of ideas and character assassination. However, many African American women were also described as

no longer interested or willing to play the game for advancement opportunities in organizations (Table 7).

Table 7

*Research Question 4: Describe How These Factors Play a Role in the Lack of African American Women in Chief Executive Officer Positions.*



**Theme 16: The Very Low Number of African American Women.** Nine of the 15 participants (60%) noted that African American women CEOs are exceedingly rare. The participants described seeing very few African American women in leadership positions at any level and observed that they are the only African American woman in a leadership position in their organizations.

I usually see very few people who look like myself. It was not so much a challenge, but an observation, no, I would think that my most challenging

component to doing my position is just dealing with the male perception of females, because I think this is new to them, and so, I think we as females also understand that if its new for us, its new for them as well. See, you can't always expect for them to view you in a larger context. Try to be patient as well, this has been a masculine network for years, so now you have to take a substantial amount of the participants paradigms, and change and shift not only to include females, but to include diversity. When you think of a man looking at a female, some men look at a female in very narrow paradigms, very narrow, so I mean either woman, relative, woman relative, that's usually about it, woman relative and subordinate. Understand what I'm saying? So then when you get a female that does not fit in those categories simply because of the way she interacts with you or because of her ore or her energy then that causes them to sometimes feel uncomfortable and relate that back to you. (AAWL 1)

The data also indicated how having so few African American women at the CEO level contributes to their negative experiences in corporate environments. The participants described African American women as locked out of networks and so isolated that they had to leave their organizations.

I was the only black person, "period" and it is "you know," I tell people, "maybe it is because I speak the Kings English," "I don't", "you know." But, if you get with the right person that see something in you to give you that encouragement, and you have that internal drive to try to exceed, that helps, that helps a lot.

(AAWL 2)

I spent the first part of my career working in nonprofits or the entertainment industry, especially in sports, very low female, very low black females. I quickly moved over into corporate America probably 8 years into my career. I can tell you my experience wasn't a great one. (AAWL 5)

My experience is that it's extremely rare to see instances of African American women in any level of management. They tend to be isolated, and locked out of networks, and tend to quit rather than continually remain uncommitted with management. (AAWL 9)

The absence of African American women at the CEO level influences the perceptions of African American women who would like to pursue these positions.

While employed as the VP of a nonprofit what I found was that I was the only person of color in that setting. The implication of that for those receiving the services "I think are substantial. I think that when people of color see other people of color in executive management positions it has an impact on their perception what they could also achieve, of color position I was the only black person period (AAWL 7)

For participants, the absence of African American women in CEO positions was described as normal. Participants identified themselves as the only person of color in an executive leadership position at their organizations and that this had always been the case for them.

I just get over the fact that I am often the only black person in the room and I am often the only black female in management, “it has been that way my whole career. I’m over it.” (AAWL 12)

Like I said my background is in engineering, I’m an ops girl through and through, I’m a very strong ops leader, and in this world you don’t have a lot of females to help guide you from a corporate standpoint....., just as a succession plan. I think we are still looking for a lot of that....., you know, I seen very few women at the CEO level, let alone....., African American women at that level....., and I never felt like I had a person to help push me to the next level. Do, does that make sense? You have to kind of, somebody have to help you pass the torch, or you wouldn’t know what to say or what to do. I think that because they are so few of us, “you know, I’ve ran into two type of women in executive positions, ones that were afraid that they were going to let one or two of us in, if they helped bring me up, does that mean that they might eliminate their position, and then you do have the ones that truly want to help you grow like they grew. But, that’s the later one is so few and so far, in between. (AAWL 14)

This theme—the very low number of African American women—was described by participants as normal and contributed to their bad experiences. African American women described themselves as isolated, locked out of networks, and having left organizations because of male colleagues’ negative perceptions of women as leaders. The stereotypical images that Caucasian men paint of African American women illustrate how uncomfortable Caucasian men are with African American women.

**Theme 17: Act Like Men and Aggressive.** Three of the 15 participants (20%) described how challenges such as acting like men and being aggressive in pursuit of CEO-level positions contribute to the under-representation of African American women at that level. Participants noted that African American women are often portrayed as angry Black women who are too aggressive and assertive, bossy, mean, scary, confrontational, and lacking in emotional intelligence. This characterization of African American women in these terms hurts African American women and reinforces negative stereotypes about them.

The data described African American women as acting like men when they aggressively pursued leadership positions. This is only a portrait of the the labels placed on African American women by decision makers.

When I say act like a man or be aggressive in the workplace I will not ever mention my family, no ones I have a family, I don't give anyone anything to judge me on, or to come with these labels, I think it's important that I keep my private life "private" and my professional life in a different lane all together. African American women today take those labels and turn them around. Do I believe I'm aggressive? Absolutely not...., but I know that I know my value and I speak up, and I share my ideas and I do all the things my male counterpart does...., I felt as though I've always done that, but in the eyes of the decision makers that's not always the case, they have these labels on us...., and we just have to work hard to remove them. I don't think I act like a man...., but I believe that's how they feel and that's fine, you can feel however you like to feel as long

as you respect me, and give credit where credit is due. But at the very beginning and the very first thing we need to do is learn what these labels are, learn where they come from, and try to remove them. The internal factors within organizations, and the unknown, these individuals may never have worked with an African American woman and don't know...., I'm afraid of the unknown, I've heard a lot of things about working with African American women and how their bossy, and they could be mean and aggressive and things like that. In the past, women in particular in their roles, we know we have to fight these perceptions about being, too soft and cry babies, and emotional and all these things. (AAWL 11)

Participants described how some of their colleagues found the aggressiveness or assertiveness of African American women to be overwhelming. African American women who behaved aggressively or assertively were treated differently than men who acted in the same manner.

I can say and do the same things, "what is dominated in the industry?" white males...., and that white male will be seen as assertive, sharp...., a mover, shaker...., promotable...., but if I do those very same things, I'm seen as aggressive...., confrontational...., or lacking what they call "EI, emotional intelligence." But what I have learned to do is, just do what I know is right, understand that people have sensitivities to that, and, where I can take a different more political approach...., at giving a message, or "you know," or offering strategy, or addressing conflict, or doing whatever needs to be done. I am political at best, but I am very direct, and I just assume that there will be some people that

like it and there will be some people that won't, and I can't be concerned either way. I just need to do what I know is best and understand that those business leaders that desire good outcome, and good positive outcome will understand what I am presenting and get on board. (AAWL 12)

In terms of challenges, I am very aggressive, told I'm pretty scary. (AAWL 14)

This theme—act like men and aggressive—described aggressive and assertive African American women as frowned upon in organizations. The data collected in this study revealed the ways in which African American women are labeled by organizational leaders. African American women had to purposefully and carefully separate themselves from the stereotypes by which they were judged by colleagues in upper-level leadership positions. Preconceived notions about race and gender negatively impacted the experiences of African American women in corporate America and their career trajectories.

**Theme 18: Preconceived Notions.** Three of the 15 participants (20%) noted how preconceived notions about African American women exposed them to blatant discrimination. The data indicated that African American women were not treated fairly in the hiring process and their applications for promotion often did not make it to the appropriate hiring personnel or simply disappeared without a trace.

I think before we really had EEO programs that actually had teeth, many things were swept under the rug as in employment decisions when they were actually blatant discrimination. (AAWL 3)



Positions at the CEO level go to a preferred group of individuals and, because African American women are not members of the favored group, they are not taken seriously as candidates when positions at that level became available.

If you're not in the favored group, no matter what your education is, your experience, "so what," you're not of the pedigree to move up, and would probably not be in the favored group to be looked upon to be moved up. (AAWL 4)

To move up the corporate ladder into CEO-level positions, African American women have to know people who already occupy top leadership roles. African American women stagnate at the lower and middle management levels because of racism and good-old-boy networks in organizations.

From the conversation I have had, I guess this is the only one I know about, and from what they share a lot of times their frustration lays more with "who you are," and instead of what you know. I hear that a lot, and I'm in Central Florida right now, and I'm not from here." I've been here for a long time, but I'm not originally from here." But down here there's a lot of what we call "the good ole boy network," a big reason for the position that I am in is for that same thing, that same reason, there is a lot of sad to say, I don't want to call it racism. I want to call it "preconceived notions about black females, and I have experienced that here as well, just my black skin and my femaleness, a lot of the white women here especially, they're different, there I "it's just no better way to put it. I will walk up to someone, put a smile on my face, and "you know," being out raced, "you can see the fear on their face and it's just like "wow" "you know," but when you

realize what they know about black people, it's somewhat understanding, "you know," and I think that causes us to be more apprehensive, it causes us to hold back a lot...., and I think that's to our detriment, it's...., almost like you have to dummy down, their losing confidence in you. But if you assert yourself, you run the risk of being angry. So, it's a very fine line...., that we have to walk, very fine line. (AAWL 13)

This theme—preconceived notions—emerged from two of the 15 participants (13%) responses. Participants described how they experienced discrimination because of preconceived notions relating to their academic pedigree, which they believed contributed to their not moving up the corporate ladder and illustrates the need for EEO programs. Because of racism and sexism, African American women do not benefit from equal opportunities in their organizations. The fact that African American women continue to endure unfair treatment in some organizations because of good-old-boy networks also illustrates how EEO programs can be used to neutralize discrimination.

**Theme 19: Dominant Male Role.** Participants in this study described how CEOs are presumed to be roles for men only. Corporate culture still supports the idea that women can not perform successfully at that level. Also, the skills and abilities of African American women often go unrecognized.

I've been told that I work just as hard as the men, I didn't take that as a compliment, because I think I work harder. We live in a society that is much more comfortable applauding masculine strength. (AAWL 1)

African American women were described by participants as being in denial about the responsibility they have for standing on their own feet like men before obtaining a role at the chief executive officer level.

But once you get into that director role, and it is a male dominant role, you have to more or less be able to stand on your feet and say “hey,” I can do the same thing you can do. Again, hair is hair, you can go, “I can go,” if you could play basketball, “I can play basketball,” you can sit with the boys, “I can sit with the boys.” You know what I’m saying, that hasn’t changed. That is what the world is, and a lot of us are in denial of it, I have been in denial of many many years, until I got to that position and realized that, that’s what it takes to really get there.

(AAWL 8)

Data revealed how CEO positions are constructed as dominant male roles but also explained how the mindset of African American women keep them out of these positions.

I think two things, it’s the mindset, then I think that....., executive management may be also a male dominant role in a lot of corporations. So from two perspectives, from a self-perspective, I think and then from an external perspective, ....., in terms of the corporations really don’t see women in leadership roles. It’s not just African Americans of course, we’re at the lowest on the totem pole, but I don’t think you see a lot of females, ....., Caucasian executives as well.

(AAWL 11)

This theme—dominant male role—emerged from three of the 15 participants’ responses (20%). These participants noted that men always serve as CEOs in corporate

environments; they also observed that African American women receive compliments when they work as hard as the men, which implies that some could be successful at the chief officer level. However, because society does not applaud the achievements of women in general, African American women remain on the bottom of organizational pyramids as organizations do not see them as potential CEOs.

**Theme 20: Cultural Differences.** Responses of three of the 15 (20%) participants described how the mindset of African American women reflects the cultural differences that influence their attainment of CEO positions. African American women believe that, because of their culture, organizations marginalize them and withhold from them well-deserved positive performance reviews and the rewards that go with those positive reviews.

I think the other piece, culturally speaking, corporate America cannot handle black women period. That's why I'm no longer in corporate America, and I'm an entrepreneur selling to corporate America, but selling to nonprofits and government agencies because. My experience is that when you, at least the way that I carry myself, very candid, I was professional, I still am, umm, very ambitious, innovative, I don't keep the status quo. I'm constantly challenging and asking questions, and that kind of stuff is rewarded in white men, but in black women it's seen as combative or aggressive, or all kinds of other adjectives I used to get in my review. So, I personally think that's why we hit a glass ceiling in corporate America. (AAWL 5)

Because there are not a lot of positions that become available at the CEO level, data collected in this study revealed how hard it is to determine what keeps African American women from obtaining these roles. Participants noted that Caucasian men were intimidated by the fact that African American women pursue CEO positions despite how they (Caucasian men) felt about them. But, then again, participants acknowledged the cultural differences in work ethic, leadership style, and education displayed by African American women as compared to the dominant culture.

Cultural differences, that's why," intimidation, I found this to be true for white males across the country. They actually love smart women, black or white, there is not a lot of color distinction, race distinction, cultural distinction, nothing, and men love smart women. But there are only so few executive positions in fortune 500 companies that can go around. You just have so many jobs, do you know what I'm saying? So, if you have a man like Earl Graves Sr., of course he's going to educate at Harvard University, and Ivy League school his three sons, and hire them to run his magazine, that's what happens right? The same thing with Mr. Johnson and Linda Johnson Rice, thank god he had a daughter, but who else going to come behind her, look "Cathy Hugh's, she got one son, okay, that's it, he has no children to my knowledge, who are the black women that are going to take over Radio 1 empire for Cathy Hugh's, "you know what I'm saying." So you only have so few things, now look, you got Condi Rice and Valerie Jarrett, they're going to both be out of a job in a minute, so they're going to go to a University or something like that, but they're not going to start their own businesses, that's the

factor that will play a part in the lack of African American women CEO's, they must start their own businesses, they must be entrepreneurial, and that's just the key get PhD's and go into teaching, they got to so that they can make sure that other African American women will be aspired to own their own businesses, it's just simple as that. I found this to be true for white males across the country.

(AAWL 6)

This theme—cultural differences—emerged in only a couple of the responses, the issue of class exposed African American women to everyday sociocultural realities.

Given the fact that there are so few positions at the CEO level, and because of racism and sexism, African American women have to be very competitive to overcome the barriers to obtaining a leadership position at the CEO level.

**Theme 21: Competitive/Competing.** Two of the participants (13%) described how the competitiveness of other candidates disadvantaged African American women who aspire to CEO positions. The data revealed the infighting amongst other women.

So, you have the infighting, you have the competitiveness for lack of a better word.

It is such a Marriot of things that we deal with to be in our positions. (AAWL 1)

African American women's low position on organizational pyramids makes it harder for them to compete for top leadership positions. Participants noted that African American women who were given an opportunity to compete for roles at the CEO level started at a position below Caucasian men and women as well as African American men.

There are so few of those positions that it's really a hard nut to crack when you're competing against a white male, okay, a white woman, okay, a black man, and

then a black woman. However, statistically most white men is more trusting of black women, but at the same time they're far more intimidated by her also.

(AAWL 6)

I think you are competing against a broad range of management candidates to detriment African Americans to getting high levels. (AAWL 9)

This theme—competitive/competing—emerged from with participants' expressed competitiveness with a broad range of management candidates revealed that having to compete for CEO positions was just one of the many challenges that prevent African American women from advancing to roles at the chief executive level.

**Theme 22: Unwilling to Play the Game.** Participants also described how, to advance in their organizations, African American women had to endure intense scrutiny. The perception of participants was that African American women may be unwilling to play the corporate game because they do not want to sell their soul in order to win.

I hate to say it like that, but, it's a game, learn the roles, play the game.

Sometimes you end up selling your soul to the devil to be that high up. And, I don't want to do that, and if somebody, and they want to do that, then they have to understand exactly what they're going to give up and what they have to put in to get there. I don't want to make it seem like it's a bad thing, but it's a challenging thing, and you have to be very very strong to sircumber through some of the pressures once you get to that level. So, I guess the first thing, do you want to do it? How bad do you want to do it? And do you know what it is going to take to get you there? And, I think that is the thing, because of the scrutiny that you'll have to

be under, a lot of people can't take that, they just can't, and they don't want to put their family through that type of scrutiny. So, just go into it with your eyes wide open, and if that's what you want, go for it, go for it. (AAWL 2)

I keep in mind that I'm playing a game of chess, not checkers, where people come up and say those stereotypical things. (AAWL 12).

This theme—unwilling to play the game—revealed that African American women heard stereotypical remarks from colleagues as they pursued top leadership positions. African American women had to be mindful of the games played in organizations and tolerate the stereotypical comments if they wanted to advance to positions at the CEO level.

**Theme 23: Stealing Ideas/Backbiting.** The ideas of African American women have been stolen by fellow candidates and how backbiting is such a large part of corporate culture. All candidates behaved aggressively in pursuit of opportunities to advance to the CEO level.

I just know that . . . , a lot of times in, “you know,” especially with peer managers, then being in an aggressive environment, I always felt like they were stealing ideas, then presenting them, they would get the promotion and I wouldn't. (AAWL 14)

Well, after working in the arena myself, I know what she went through, I know it was a series, “maybe the term is backbiting,” or robbery, or who you know. (AAWL 15)



This theme—stealing ideas/backbiting—was described by two of the 15 participants (13%). The data revealed how colleagues who applied for open CEO-level positions obtained promotions over their African American female colleagues who also applied, even when they stole their colleagues' (African American women's) ideas. Members of the dominant culture received more promotions and advancement opportunities than members of the non-dominant culture, despite their unethical behavior.

**Theme 24: African American Women Do Not Believe They Belong.** Several participants emphasized how African American women do not believe they belong in positions at the CEO level. Data illustrated how African American women believe that racism and sexism negatively impact them when aspiring to executive and CEO positions. So, psychologically and emotionally, African American women do not believe they can reach positions at these levels.

The hard part is, “now this is the internal part,” “is believing that I belong,” “that I have as much right to be at the table as anybody else. So, I think that with with black women, it’s a catch 22, some of the responsibility is on us to become educated and to “push n would think we would in 2014 from the 1800’s, we just haven’t, they still see you as “gal” and a “girl,” and all this other stuff. (AAWL 2)

That’s the key in terms of being in a position to promoted, because if you don’t think you’re a leader, you will not be one, but whatever you think you can or can’t you’re right, and that I believe is the limitation, not only the fact that....., the corporate entities are recognizing your value and your strength, but, “you know,” the person individually may not be representing that either. (AAWL 7)

African American women do not fight for positions at the top level of their organizations. Participants described African American women as believing that their inability to attain leadership positions at the CEO level was a result of their race and sex.

I have had the misfortune of working with people that have the “woe” it’s about me, “you know,” I’m black, so they’re not going to let me do this or “you know,” I’m a black woman so that’s a double negative, and, “you know,” I’ve tried to sit and talk to them and tell them, “Like okay get over it “that is the truth,” “I agree with you,” it’s definitely a little more challenging for us, but anything worth having is worth the fight, “right?” “man up and get it done,” and I think there are people that have the idea that “being a victim is better than being victorious,” “Like I think you have to make a choice, you can say that, “I’m starting from a disadvantaged situation, disadvantage doesn’t mean that I’m never going to get,” it just means that I have to be more creative, I have to be more innovative, and if you can’t challenge yourself to be more creative and innovative, “What are you going to do when you get in a CEO position? It’s all training, right? Do you think that just because you have a CEO position or some senior director, or organizational leader position that people are just going to listen to you?, that you’re going automatically have credibility, “no,” you’re going to have to be innovative, you’re going to have to work a little harder, you’re going to have to be a little smarter, and if you don’t take the bump in the road as training, then you’re not meant for that role. (AAWL 12)

This theme—African American women do not believe they belong—emerged in the responses of three of the 15 participants (20%). Participants revealed that racism and sexism undermined their self-confidence and limited their mobility in corporate organizations; they also expressed the belief that the confidence African American women, in general, has decreased. African American women limit themselves to the sub-executive levels and hesitate to exhibit the full range of their talents. Despite how hard they work and how innovative they are, African American women have not made significant strides in breaking into top leadership positions in corporate America. Because of the negative stereotypes about African American women's capacity to lead, promotions and advancement opportunities are given to a limited few African American women.

The research questions probed the what and how concerning African American women's continued underrepresentation at the CEO level in large organizations, especially as their presence at the executive leadership level has increased. The questions asked concerned what contributed to the increase; the answers suggest an explanation, which describes unclaimed racism on behalf of major organizations.

### **Summary**

The results of this study clarified several main themes related to the lack of African American women CEOs in corporate America. Through the interviews and resulting narratives of the African American women who work in corporate environments, the researcher was able to collect personal insights into the lack of African American women at the CEO level. The data consisted of interviews with 15 African

American women, from which six primary themes emerged that ultimately provided an explanation as to why there continues to be a limited number of African American women at the CEO level in some of the largest organizations in the US. Nearly every narrative or comment fell into one of the 24 sub-themes summarized below and, when combined, painted a clear picture of the lived experiences of African American women aspiring to CEO positions in corporate America.

The data indicated that providing organizational support, education, and diversity initiatives contributed to the increase of African American women at the executive leadership level over the last 10 years. African American women are, without a doubt, at an advantage when they engage in the following behaviors: (a) obtain an advanced education, (b) change companies, (c) build professional relationships, and (d) receive help to advance in their organizations. Still, these activities take place in the context of legal imperatives that obligate organizations to increase the number of minorities in leadership positions at the executive level; this legal obligation accounts for the slight increase in the number of African American women in those roles.

The data collected for this study also indicated that African American women encounter racism and sexism, negative stereotypes, a dearth of mentors, and social and cultural concerns that cause them to hesitate pursuing positions at the CEO level, which also contributes to their underrepresentation at that level. Also revealed in the research data was that the upbringing of African American women contributed to their limited presence at the CEO level in corporate environments. Data revealed how the already very low number of African American women in executive level positions contributes to the

limited number of African American women at the CEO level. Reasons for this limited presence at the CEO level includes the perception that African American women are aggressive when pursuing these positions; African American women are portrayed as acting like men. The research data described CEO positions as dominant male roles, and African American women had to be competitive as they were competing with Caucasian men. However, because of the cultural differences related to race and sex, African American women described missing out on promotions that were given to colleagues who stole their ideas and engaged in backbiting. African American women responded to this element of corporate culture by withdrawing their applications for competitive, CEO-level positions, believing that they just didn't belong in the top leadership ranks.

The conversations that took place between the researcher and the participants (African American women) painted a portrait of what they experience when trying to climb the corporate ladder at any level in corporate organizations. Participants' experiences might or might not be the same experiences of other African American women who have reached the C-suites in corporate America. However, the African American women in this study are representative of the many African American women pursuing CEO positions in US corporations. All the participants told their stories as they experienced them, enthusiastically and eagerly. Their combined narratives, while personal to each African American woman, constituted a significant and reliable portrayal of Black women's experiences that contribute to the low numbers at the CEO level.

## Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this study was to examine the lived experiences of African American women who aspire to CEO roles to obtain a better understanding of why there continues to be a limited number of African American women in CEO roles in the United States. My research revealed that more African American women have advanced to leadership positions because they are receiving organizational support and advancing their education. It also showed that, if it were not for diversity initiatives, these women would not have obtained the support or been able to return to school—key factors in their promotion to the leadership ranks. Although corporations are legally obligated to increase the number of minorities at the executive leadership level, African American women initially received very limited support from organizational leaders. African American women who aspired to leadership positions developed their own advancement strategies, including earning advanced degrees, changing jobs that often entailed moving to other cities and states, and building strong professional relationships. The data I collected during this study showed how corporate environments appear to be in support of closing the race and gender gap at the executive leadership level. However, these efforts to promote African American women into top leadership positions were the result of governmental forces, the demands of customers, and the desire to avoid a loss of revenues and possible penalties because of non-compliance of government regulations.

### **Interpretation of Findings by Research Question**

The data showed that the increased numbers of African American women in positions at the executive leadership level resulted from diversity initiatives that made possible their ability to return to school, and provided a context in which organizational leaders could recognize their talent. However, organizations' use of diversity initiatives contributed to the organizational practices and processes that legally allow them to minimize the number of minorities they hire at the executive level. By doing this, organizations avoid repercussions from the government and their clients. Additionally, because African American women qualify as minorities on two factors (race and sex), participants in this study observed that organizations only promoted them to the executive level because the benefits they received from the government.

Chapter 4 included transcribed data that included insights regarding the perceived factors that contribute to the low number of African American women CEOs. My examination of the participants' lived experiences in Chapter 4 led me to identify themes that I used to establish the basis for the conclusions of this study. Kafle (2013) prompted qualitative phenomenology as a research method and design because in it the real meaning of individuals' experiences can be separated from the phenomenon. The lived experiences of African American women aspiring to CEO positions generated the data that led to the construction of themes. Although the number of African American women in leadership roles (e.g., directors, senior directors, vice presidents, and senior vice presidents) in US corporations has increased, African American remain underrepresented at the CEO level. In 2011, African American women represented just 11.3% of the total

number of minorities occupying seats on corporate boards in Fortune 500 companies; minorities overall represented just 3% of board seats for that same year (Catalyst, 2012). In 2012, there were only three African American women CEO in the Fortune 500 (Catalyst, 2012).

Results I summarized in Chapter 4 included perceived factors that contribute to the lack of African American women CEOs in corporate America. Analysis of the transcribed interview data revealed 24 primary themes relating to the lived experiences of African American women aspiring to CEO positions. Fourteen of the 15 participants (93%) in this study mentioned race, sex, and class as being obstacles to climbing the corporate ladder. The perceptions of over half of the participants revealed contributing factors such as organizational practices and processes and African American women themselves. Moreover, less than half of the 15 participants identified talent development, education, and stereotypes as being an obstacle to climbing the corporate ladder. However, participants identified invisible barriers (“the glass ceiling”) as the major reason why African American women are underrepresented in top leadership positions in U.S. corporations; this underrepresentation persists despite their advancement to leadership positions at the executive level. The participants noted that the low number of African American women in CEO positions was driven by the same factors they had experienced in their own careers: racism, sexism, negative stereotypes linked to their race, insufficient organizational support, limited access to professional networks, and the trivialization of their talent.



For instance, one participant reported, “We were viewed initially as our femininity being an obstacle, or something that had to be dealt with very gingerly, or not taken seriously” (AAWL 1). Speaking of workplace diversity, another participant said, “I don’t think it would have increased that much if there weren’t other people in companies that said, ‘I want to work with companies that have people that look like the population’” (AAWL 2). Yet another participant reported that the inclusion of African American women in leadership positions was strategic practices that actually decreased workplace diversity, noting, “I believe that because of many instances, promoting a black female fills two spots on the diversity roster if you can find a candidate” (AAWL 3).

The time, and . . . ., there was kind of a upsurge of African American men moving up the ladder, and that somewhat opened the door for example, Ursula Burns, sisters like that was able to get in, because of brothers, or where it got to a point, “okay” to let one of us in, and they’ve got a lot of publicity over that, and they’re the ones that’s always shown in the “you know” the majority company. (AAWL 4)

Someone tapped me to be a director, then I didn’t get the job, and I couldn’t even get any substantial feedback . . . ., when someone exceeds your expectations and they put that on paper, and yet they don’t get promoted, or they don’t get put in those other positions, you just have to ask yourself, what else is at play? Because if I’m hitting all the objectives you want me to hit and I’m exceeding your expectations, and I didn’t want that particular director job,

someone tapped me to apply for it, and then I didn't get it, then I'm left to think that it can't be anything else, "but because I'm black." I can't even put any logic around something like that, around why something like that would happen. So, my perception is that often times the style, and if especially you're like me, I'm one of those African American women, it's excellence, that's what I'm shooting for, I'm shooting for it personally and professionally, I hold myself to very high standards, and those that work with me, same thing, and I develop people, and I care, and I just find that the corporate environment, "you know," there is so much going on behind the scenes and there is so much politics that it really isn't about your leadership competencies, or what you bring to the table, there's other things at play in both promotions and who gets moved and who doesn't. (AAWL 5)

You have a few other women who are making significant strides in the media, aww man, their jumping off the hook in media, but African American women in corporate America, they're still the last ones on the totem pole, "if you will," I'm just being real with you from a culture perspective. (AAWL 6)

In terms of that level, when people are entering the workforce at an entry level, then a mid-level, then they're elevating higher, they should be in a position to be viewed as a potential for talent development and further advancement as executives. So, there's a synergy that have to happen with both the individual, the employee and the employer, now, do racism have a role that would hinder that transition? Of course, that's the nature of the flat form of life, unfortunately,

however, we do see that there are African American women in high leadership roles. (AAWL 7)

Market being open more, and accepting African Americans as an individual who is just as talented as anyone else. (AAWL 8)

They are never too many of them, so the organization kind of looks the other way and doesn't bother itself too much about the one or two....., senior or middle managers who is never going to be promoted to partner, who are never going to make it to a more executive role, but they're there, and their presence is enough. And that's something that I've heard, more than once by those colloquies, and it's efficient if you're in a management role overseeing the work of those who may not be African Americans, "I mean, that's enough." (AAWL 9)

I think it's because it's still a man's world, and the "whole," you know "the boys club," where you literally have to fight to make yourself get to that position. (AAWL 10)

I learned that I was already invisible to them, so I had to work to make myself visible and the more invisible I became, the more comfortable they became with me. (AAWL 11)

Well I can say at my organization we have, umm, a vice president of human resources that is black, she also sits on the board of our company..., and I doubt

that if she was not in that position, I would have been promoted...., to where I am in mid management...., I would say “senior management.” (AAWL 12)

If you assert yourself, you run the risk of being angry. So, it’s a very fine line ...., that we have to walk, very fine line. (AAWL 13)

I had been actually extremely fortunate, except for in very few cases that have upper level managers see my potential and was able to help me pull up, probably not as fast as they did the guy...., but they were, but I was eventually able to pull up, I just had to be twice as good as the person sitting next to me, as opposed to just being good at what I do like the person next to me and get pulled up. (AAWL 14)

In this study, I combined perceived factors contributing to the lack of African American women CEOs in corporate America with the influence of race, sex, and class on their lived experiences to construct shared themes. I then used these themes to provide an in-depth qualitative view of these factors in the individual experiences of African American women aspiring to CEO positions in corporate environments. The results of this study offered a basis for further examination of the connection between race, sex, class, and leadership from the perspective of critical race theory and black feminist theory (see Creswell, 2012). Future research studies examining the perceived factors that contribute to the lack of African American women CEOs may encourage the implementation of more diversity initiatives targeted at closing the race and gender gap at the executive and CEO levels. Elimination of the perceived contributing factors may also

assist women in overcoming entrenched organizational barriers along the way. This qualitative phenomenological study included 15 African American women presently in middle- to upper-level managerial positions who agreed to participate in an in-depth, semi-structured interview and answer four open-ended research questions.

### **Research Question 1**

Research Question 1 asked the following: What contributed to the increase of African American women in positions as directors, senior directors, vice presidents, and senior vice presidents in corporate America? The findings showed that the increase in African American women in these roles resulted from (a) African American women receiving much-needed organizational support, (b) more organizations implementing diversity initiatives, and (c) more African American women earning advanced degrees. Although more African American women are in leadership roles now than in the past, nearly all the participants believed that the increase only occurred because it worked to corporate America's advantage. What's more, participants believed diversity plans implemented by these organizations were driven by affirmative action requirements and equal opportunity regulations and not by a genuine desire to open their ranks to minority candidates.

Because of affirmative action initiatives, preferential access is given to underrepresented ethnic groups in areas such as education, and in organizations from which they have been historically excluded. African American women, historically disadvantaged because of their lack of education, have received opportunities to return to school (Nittle, n.d.). Although more organizations have implemented diversity initiatives

and see the value in having a diverse workforce, similar initiatives at the top leadership level have been in place for over 20 years. Participants observed that equal opportunities were given to African American women after organizational leaders took a sudden interest in their talent and potential, which was perceived as unusual. As one of the participants stated:

I have got to the point of where I am in my career not only because I was determined to educate myself and to continue to challenge myself, but there had been white people in positions and I have been fortunate enough that they saw something in me, and they encouraged me to keep going. I would say that, that's not the norm, because I don't see that . . . I don't see that across the board.

(AAWL 2)

Participants insisted that there was no sincere commitment by organizations to improve the race and gender gap at the executive leadership level. This aligns with Williams, Kilanski, and Muller's (2014) claim that organizations implemented diversity initiatives so that they could stay competitive rather than in response to any desire to address discrimination or inequality, although such initiatives may also help to address discrimination. As revealed in the narratives of a couple of the participants, the increase in African American women at the executive level corresponded with what was in the best interest of the organizations and had nothing to do with providing equal opportunities to African American women. As one of the participants noted, "I think the diversity initiatives are driving that, 'to me' it's strictly a business decision" (AAWL 2). Her observation was echoed in the response of another participant who reported, "I

believe that because of many instances, promoting a black female fills two spots on the diversity roster if you can find a candidate” (AAWL 3).

### **Research Question 2**

Research Question 2 asked the following question: how did the contributing factors contribute to the increase of African American women in roles at the executive level? A notable finding in this study was the degree of awareness that African American women expressed regarding the obstacles, barriers, and unfair treatment that keep them from advancing in their organizations. The data showed how African American women obtained positions at the executive leadership level for the following reasons:

- Organizations recognized their legal obligation;
- Organizations strategically promoted them (African American women);
- African American women benefitted from enhanced educational opportunities and access, and
- African American women were already fulfilling the responsibilities associated with executive-level positions.

The data revealed the ways that African American women were able to overcome some of the barriers that kept them from obtaining positions at any level of leadership in corporate America. First, an advanced level of education is an economic necessity for African American women; without an education, most of them remained in the background in their organizations and middle-class society (Cooper, 2016; Smith, 2013). Although data showed that diversity initiatives made it possible for African American women to return to school, it also showed that African American women were

strategically elevated to executive leadership positions. One of the participants mentioned that:

So the pedigree, while some of us do have it because the role we have to play, it's just not something they could imagine making happen. Somebody would have to step out the box. (AAWL 4)

Although all of the participants demonstrated the motivation and experience needed to advance in their careers, they still had to take extraordinary measures to move up the corporate ladder. Despite the presence of diversity initiatives, participants reported having to leave their previous organizations for promotional opportunities in other cities and states and invest time in building their own professional networks. Furthermore, participants revealed that some were pushed into management positions as a result of government pressure on corporations to increase diversity and equal opportunity. Their stories revealed that, because of their race and sex, laws and regulations related to diversity needed to be established and enforced because organizational leaders of the dominant culture would not have thought to take such steps without this external motivation. Participants also noted that African American women are not the preferred “pedigree” and organizational processes and procedures associated with diversity initiatives lawfully give organizations permission to limit their chances of advancing (Festestjian et al., 2013). Due to persistent racism and sexism, African American women experience a high level of systematic prejudice (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012) and the policies and practices of the dominant culture are controlling and dishonest. Participants observed that organizations that make an intentional effort to recruit African American



women only did so for the benefits associated with such efforts (Brookfield, 2014); they didn't act out of a desire to increase promotional opportunities for African American women simply because it was the right thing to do. In corporate environments, African American women were promoted to executive levels out of fear of the president and the loss of business and goodwill.

Because of the dominant culture, marginalized groups such as African American women and men have been systematically pushed aside in organizations. Participants' stories show that because of their sex, African American women appear less threatening to the dominant culture and, as a result, are strategically promoted ahead of African American men (Prins, 2006). Although there is opposing research regarding the dominant culture's fear of African American women, participants noted that, while they are trusted by the dominant culture, corporations are very slow to add minority candidates, including African American women, to leadership teams at the executive level. Participants observed that some organizations purposely misuse diversity initiatives because, legally, they have the right to hire, promote, and limit the number of African American women in executive positions, which clearly reveals unclaimed racism. Researchers have noted that qualified African American women encounter barriers that impede their advancement to positions as associate directors, directors, senior directors, vice presidents, and presidents; these barriers also impede their advancement to CEO positions (Durr & Harvey-Wingfield, 2011; Rhode & Packel, 2014; Rose & Bielby, 2011).

### **Research Question 3**

Research Question 3 asked the following question: what contributes to the lack of African American women CEOs in corporate America? Participant responses identified contributing factors such as (a) racism and sexism; (b) stereotypes; (c) the hesitancy of African American women; (d) expense and accountability; (e) their culture and upbringing; and (f) lack of mentors. Although there are slightly more African American women in corporate America in executive leadership positions than in the past, all participants noted that their underrepresentation at the CEO level can be attributed to racism and the glass ceiling.

For example, most of the participants acknowledged that barriers rooted in racism and sexism contribute significantly to the underrepresentation of African American women at the CEO level. The US Department of Labor, Federal Glass Ceiling Commission (1995) indicated that, although organizations cannot control societal barriers such as supply (i.e., education and attainment), there are barriers that can be controlled, including categorization, bias, and prejudice related to sex, ethnic group, and culture. Jackson et al. (2014) and Weyer (2007) found that the obstacles and challenges faced by African American women in corporate organizations qualified as indirect barriers (i.e., the glass ceiling). A few of the participants' stories revealed that fear of failure was a reason why some African American women did not pursue top leadership positions. African American women did not pursue chief executive officer positions because they lacked support from the African American community and their family nucleus, so earlier studies on these differences related to the glass ceiling were not considered in Chapter 2.

The glass ceiling that created disparities generating gender stereotyping and scarcity of opportunities that provide them with the experience and access required to advance. Racism, sexism, and stereotyping contribute to African American women's limited presence at the CEO level. Hellman (2012) suggested that traditional stereotypes, including those that are associated with modern sexism, were overt and subtle and constituted an obstacle for all women aspiring to upper-level leadership roles. However, the labels placed on African American women by society and subsequently brought into corporate environments by members of the dominant culture contribute to African American women's low level of consideration for positions as CEOs. London, Downey, Romero-Canyas, Rattan, and Tyson (2012) indicated that gender inequities create stressful environments for African American women in executive-level positions. Participants' stories showed that racism and sexism create barriers for African American women when they pursue roles at the CEO level. Personal obligations undermine some African American women's desire to advance to top leadership positions, while others contend with the organizational practices that make it difficult for them to carry out their professional obligations, another indirect outcome of the glass ceiling (Roberts, Cha, & Kim, 2014).

Burke and Mattis (2013) indicated that the absence of mentors or role models that resemble African American women was a significant obstacle for women of color attempting to advance in their organizations. Because they lack female and particularly African American female mentors, African American women lack guidance concerning how to successfully navigate corporate culture. Previous research about where African

American women obtained their education was not considered in Chapter 2. However, participants indicated that the colleges and universities they attended constituted an influential factor regarding when and if they advanced in their organizations, a form of educational elitism. Davis and Maldonado (2015) indicated that the talents and efforts of African American women are undermined by Caucasian men because African American women present increased competition for a limited number of CEO-level positions; these men believe that African American women's success in the corporate sphere should come from hard work and competition. For example, participants in this study observed that competition for top leadership positions is high; this condition constitutes an indirect barrier for African American women pursuing CEO roles in corporate America (Beasley, 2012; Eagly, 2012; Hughes, 2015; Ospina et.al, 2012; Rhode & Packel; 2014; Trautman, 2014).

#### **Research Question 4**

Research Question 4 asked participants to respond to the following statement: describe how the contributing factors contribute to the lack of African American women chief executive officers. Participants identified the following factors as preventing their advancement to CEO-level positions: (a) very low numbers of African American woman in US corporations; (b) the perception that African American women are too aggressive and assertive, (c) the preconceived notions; (d) dominant male roles (e) cultural differences; and their (f) their unwillingness to play the corporate game. These factors illustrate how invisible societal barriers (i.e., the glass ceiling) prevent African American women from increasing their presence at the CEO level in corporate America.

The research data indicated how race, gender, and social class disempower African American women, excluding them from professional networks and vital professional validation. It is not uncommon for an African American woman in a position of corporate leadership to be the only African American or woman in a predominantly White organization. Participants noted how uncommon it was for an African American woman to attain a CEO-level position. Their stories illustrated how these challenges (e.g., lack of African American women mentors in CEO positions) affected their expectations of what other women, particularly African American women, can achieve. Also, participants emphasized how stereotypical images of African American women contribute to their limited presence at the CEO level. They also highlighted the issue of men's negative perceptions of African American women (e.g., aggressive, angry, assertive, arrogant, confrontational, lacking emotional intelligence, domineering) that decreased their desire to pursue CEO positions. African American women do not fit the leadership prototype promoted by the dominant culture (Berry & Bell, 2012; Byrd, 2014; D'Agostino & Levine, 2009; Giscombe, 2012; Hoyt, 2012; Ortiz & Roscigno, 2009; Stainback & Tomaskovic-Devey, 2012).

Because of the negative, stereotypical images associated with African American women, the majority of the participants' stories described their experience in corporate America as isolating, being locked out of networks, and having to work harder than other men and women in leadership positions throughout their professional career. Although the data revealed that participants believe that hard work contributed to their corporate success and mobility, their stories also show they are unrewarded, disappointed, and

stuck because of the competition with Caucasian men and women as well as colleagues with Ivy League degrees, (Davies-Netzley, 2013). Participants also noted challenges such as lack of support, good-old-boy networks, and life-changing events as contributing to the near absence of African American women at the CEO level in organizations; they described organizations as not being bothered by the low numbers of African American women in positions of leadership in their organizations.

According to the participants in this study, African American women's race and sex turned advancement to CEO positions into a game of “double jeopardy,” a game many African American women are unwilling to play (Coombs, 2003; Jean-Marie & Martinez, 2013; London et al., 2012; Smith & Joseph, 2010). Because they have to fight for positions at the leadership level in organizations, African American women often lose their enthusiasm and ambition for corporate advancement, and many of them consider altering their career paths. Robinson and Nelson (2008) indicated that African American women encountered challenges in male-dominated organizations where gender bias paints Caucasian men as the model of corporate leadership. Barriers to advancement (i.e., cultural, social, and intentional discrimination) were identified by the African American women who participated in this study. Their stories portrayed African American women's cultural differences as the reason for their not having the “right pedigree” and not belonging to the favored group, which impacts their not being predestined for top corporate leadership positions (Black, 2012). The data provides a clear indication of what contributed to the increased numbers of African American women in leadership positions at the executive level over the last 10 years; this data also partly explains their

underrepresentation as CEOs. These factors keep African American women from advancing not only to executive and CEO positions but also leadership positions in general.

All four research questions were answered. Some of the stories of the African American women who participated in this study revealed insightful details regarding their lived experiences in organizations that were beyond the scope of this study but supplied a new context to the research questions. There are opportunities to further the research on the lack of African American women CEOs; questions may involve the issue of organizations' true reasons for implementing diversity initiatives to close the race and gender gap at top leadership levels. There is also an opportunity to further the research on the role that African American women play in their underrepresentation at the CEO level in corporate environments.

### **Limitations**

A few limitations constrained the present research study. One of the limitations involves the shortage of African American women in mid to upper-level managerial roles in corporate America. The paucity of African American women in these roles contributes to the limited perspectives concerning their underrepresentation at the corporate level. The low numbers of African American women in leadership positions also meant that each potential participant was vital to the success of the study. Several African American women who responded to the researcher on LinkedIn met the criteria for participating in the study but did not return the confidentiality agreement or did not attend scheduled interviews. The second limitation was the nature of the data collected for analysis; the

robustness of the data was contingent on participants' abilities to reflect on their pasts and communicate their lived experiences. The third and most significant limitation to this study was the capacity of the researcher to bracket all of her personal biases to ensure the validity of the data. The research process started with the elimination of personal preferences through reflectivity, allowing the researcher to separate all of her own lived experiences from those of the participants to manage the possibility of personal bias. Bracketing personal biases ensured that the conclusions reflect as close as possible what the members meant. The fourth limitation was the sample size. The sample consists of African American women in mid to upper-level managerial roles in corporate America. The distinct experiences of the 15 participants may not represent all experiences of African American women in these positions. Finally, because of the small sample size of this study, findings were limited.

## **Recommendations**

### **Recommendations for Future Study**

This research study presents various opportunities to analyze the underrepresentation of African American women at the executive and CEO levels in corporate America. One opportunity for analysis and review is how legitimate are the efforts fortune 500 companies make through the implementation of diversity initiatives to improve the race and gender gap at the executive and CEO levels? Beckwith, Carter, and Peters (2016) indicated that diversity programs, singlehanded, are not the answer. The absence of women of color on boards of directors of two-thirds of companies on the Fortune 500 list is huge (Warner, 2014). Validating how organizations implementation



of diversity programs has not eliminated the glass ceiling, and for African American women is now a “concrete ceiling” (Catalyst, 1999). Clearly, racism, sexism, and classism continue to be a barrier to advancement opportunities for African American women.

### **Recommendations for Additional Research**

This study examined the lived experiences of African American women aspiring to CEO positions in Fortune 500 companies. One recommendation is for the continuance of research studies that reference lived experiences of African American women in corporate America who aspire to CEO roles. According to Jean-Marie, Normore, and Cumings Mansfield (2016), there is a need for more qualitative studies on the lived experiences of African American women aspiring to these positions. The results of the research study revealed the need for corporate America to encourage women to pursue executive-level positions. African American women leaders do well. Byrd (2014) noted that African American women did well as leaders in organizations that did not have traditional perceptions of leaders as Caucasian men. According to Stanley (2009), African American women were empowered once they learned to move through dominant group settings and survive disempowering experiences.

The second recommendation is the use of a qualitative phenomenology research method and design. From the perspective of African American women, their lived experiences will be captured and uncovered with a qualitative phenomenological research study (Davis, 2012). A qualitative phenomenological research method and design will describe, interpret, and assist with understanding the essence of the lived experiences of

African American women in organizations who aspire to leadership titles (Woods, 2015). The lack of African American women CEOs is a continual problem in Fortune 500 companies. Furthermore, a qualitative phenomenological research study addresses ways in which an organizations culture, policies, and practices contribute to racism and sexism African American women experience in their attempt to advance in the workplace (Sepand, 2015).

### **Recommendations for African American Women Aspiring to CEO Roles**

Organizations have within their control available and accessible executive level positions for people of color who have the appropriate experience, background, and ability to perform successfully (Jackson et al., 2014). The increased representation of African American women in executive-level roles demonstrates that there are some Black women willing to take the necessary risks to climb the corporate ladder. To improve their chances of advancing, African American women should have a detailed plan that lists their needs, their goals, and what experience and skill set are required to achieve that goal. African American women should consider lateral career moves to gain a broad knowledge and experience of their organization; they should also educate themselves about the company and the industry (Mullings, 2014).

The African American women who participated in this study observed that negative perceptions of them were hurtful and emerged as a significant challenge. Another recommendation is for African American women to ignore the stereotypical labels associated with the “angry Black woman.” African American women cannot concern themselves labels that will always be an issue in corporate America. Still,

African American women leaders must learn the significance of some of these stereotypes to overcome the perception of being angry. According to Rossette (2012), the characteristics of the “angry Black woman” correspond to positive leadership qualities (i.e., influential, aggressive, confident, and secure). African American women leaders who exhibit dominant behaviors when interacting with subordinates received better reviews than African American men and Caucasian women who behave in the same manner (Rosette, 2012). African American women benefit from being assertive and dominant, and women do not need to embrace masculine demeanors to get to the top (Mann, Budworth, & Ismaila, 2012). African American women who are authentic, appreciative, and respected will find success in corporate America.

Participants in this study indicated that they lacked mentors and role models resembling themselves in their organizations. The Executive Leadership Council in 2012 stated that mentors could be useful in helping African American women take risks and advised building mentor relationships early in one’s careers. African American women are responsible for understanding the opportunities available for executive-level development inside and outside of their organizations and initiating conversations with decision makers. Also, African American women should cultivate relationships with individuals who are dissimilar from them and above them in terms of leadership position. African American women cannot be afraid to expand their professional networks to include colleagues who are a level or two above them. The Executive Leadership Council reported:

If African American women want to take the risk in a positive direction, they need to get a different perspective on things from various people. You have to be colorblind. You have to move forward and take risks, just as your white counterparts would. You have to step over those barriers and be willing to find the balance and think outside the box. (p. 21)

Finally, participants in this study emphasized that the lack of African American women CEOs contributes to racism and sexism in corporate organizations. As reported by Coachman (2009), the Executive Leadership Council noted that current Caucasian men who are CEOs do not know any African American women in this setting. African American women executives leave profit and loss roles early in search of big operating positions, which limits the time spent developing strategic relationships (Coachman, 2009). Aspiring African women's decisions to leave profit and loss positions in organizations affects their visibility when referencing representation as chief executive officers. African American women leaders must acknowledge this and work to prolong the tenure in such roles.

### **Recommendations for Decision Makers in Organizations**

The first and most important recommendation for decision makers in corporate organizations is to increase the representation of African American women in CEO positions. According to the Executive Leadership Council, the number of African American women who have the appropriate level of experience to advance to CEO-level positions simply does not exist Coachman (2009). Another recommendation requires organizational leaders to identify ways in which they can attract, engage, and retain

professional African American women. Corporate practices have a substantial and sometimes unfavorable influence on hiring practices and the development of women and African American executives (Cain, 2005). Corporations should hire and promote African American women into positions that match their skills, contributions, and educational qualifications. African American women indicate that they do not have the community support that encourages them to pursue CEO positions in major corporations.

The third recommendation involves organizational leaders encouraging diversity in their boardrooms. Mandatory revisions to organizations diversity programs should take place because not all African American women and other women benefit from the same diversity initiatives. According to Catalyst (2012), many women feel that diversity programs disregard them; organizations must adjust their diversity plans to match the specific needs of the women they are intended to serve. Organizations often lack insight into what good leadership skills are; this lack of insight leads to a lack of commitment to increasing diversity and development programs (James, 2014). Although this is a problem for all organizational executives, it is a significant issue for the ones who are not a part of the dominant culture. The removal of the obstacles that challenge the advancement of people of color, including African American women, will assist organizations to address its future leadership needs (James, 2014).

### **Implications for Positive Social Change**

This qualitative phenomenological study explored the factors that contributed to the increase of African American women in positions at the executive leadership level over the past 10 years. Findings indicate that diversity initiatives, organizational support,

and education account for the increase in the number of African American women CEOs. This study tells the story of African American women who work in US corporations and aspire to CEO positions. This study should be duplicated in various types of organizations to obtain new contributors to the advancement of African American women in roles as executive-level leaders.

The study is significant because it sheds light on organizations' implementation of diversity initiatives that decreased the obstacles and challenges endured by African American women when trying to climb the corporate ladder. The increase in the number of African American women at the CEO level stimulates innovation because they challenge status quo thinking (Coachman, 2009). Organizational support is the guiding factor in an individual's climb to the top (James, 2014). The increased representation of African American women at the executive level contributes to positive social change. The lived experiences of the African American women who participated in this study revealed that they overcame obstacles to advancement through obtaining advanced degrees, working hard, and gaining experience. These African American women achieved success as leaders in corporate America, providing a compelling example for other African American women who aspire to CEO positions. Aspiring African American women leaders are aware of the barriers that can impede their success (Byrd, 2014). Ultimately, the advancement of more women, especially African American women, into positions at the executive and CEO level will provide the necessary role models and mentors and encourage other women to pursue these roles.

Despite the accomplishments of African American women, US corporations must continue to nurture role models, increase professional development opportunities, and strengthen diversity initiatives to address the needs of all women, and African American women in particular. Aspiring African American women who desire to climb the corporate ladder should understand that the perceptions that others may have of them are historical. To rise to a CEO position demands that African American women know their craft, exude confidence, display determination, and be unafraid of failure. Additional organizations are implementing and utilizing diversity and inclusion programs promoted by the EEOC to increase the number of African American women in executive-level positions; this trend represents a positive force for social change. The professional success of women, particularly African American women, decreases the obstacles and challenges endured by other African American women who want to climb the corporate ladder.

The lived experiences of each participant in this study came to life when she shared personal insights into her climb up the corporate ladder. Although each of their experiences were unique, the commonalities of their experiences emerged in themes such as race, sex, and class that contributed to the denial of promotions, lack of visibility, lack of mentors and role models, having to work harder than other women to gain recognition, and perceptions that others had of them. African American women's race, sex and social class, stereotypes, and organizational practices continue to be an obstacle when climbing the corporate ladder. However, their qualifications and skills do matter when aspiring to CEO positions. For some of these African American women, their desire to climb the

corporate ladder continues, and each day they prove to be competent leaders. The purpose of this study was satisfied through the identification of 6 primary themes and 24 subthemes. The significance of this study includes implications for additional research as well as advice for decision makers in organizations and aspiring African American women in corporate America.

### **Conclusions**

The research findings of this qualitative phenomenological study show the continuing need to understand the reasons why African American women are underrepresented at the CEO-level in US corporations. Researchers revealed that race, sex, class, and negative stereotypes constitute the biggest challenges to African American women's professional advancement, along with organization practices that impede their success (Berry & Bell, 2012; Davis, 2012; Hughes, 2015). The researcher also recognizes the need for African American women role models and mentors at the executive level and for organizations to revise their diversity programs to foment positive social change (Bryant & Garnham, 2014; Tarmy, 2012).



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## Appendix A: Request for Participants

Doctoral student in need of African American women in mid to upper-managerial positions aspiring to chief executive officer positions, minimum 35 years of age and 7 years of managerial experience, in Fortune 500 companies, a part of corporate America, in the United States. The purpose of this study is to examine the lived experiences and perceptions of African American women who aspire to be chief executive officers in corporate America. The experiences and perceptions of these women will be examined to obtain a better understanding as to why there continues to be a limited number of African American women chief executive officers in corporate America, despite the increase of African American women in executive level roles. The study aims to add to the existing literature about the lack of African American Women CEOs in Corporate America. The research findings may provide information that could increase the number of women, especially African American women in chief executive officer positions. Voluntarily participating in a research study that describe and explore the lived experiences of African American women aspiring to chief executive officer roles may benefit and encourage other professional women aspiring to chief executive officer roles in corporate America. African American women aspiring to chief executive officer positions may also educate and emotionally prepare women in general for their climb up the professional ladder in pursuit of upper-level roles in organizations.

Working as a full time professional and part time doctoral student, I know how valuable your time is. Participation in this research study involves the completion of a criteria questionnaire, one open-ended interview, one central research question and four sub-questions at your preferred location and time. The interview will be conducted via GoToMeeting®. The ultimate goal of the research study is to examine and describe the perceptions of African American women lived experiences when aspiring to chief executive officer positions in Fortune 500 companies, a part of corporate America in regards to “The Lack Of African American Women CEOs, in Corporate America.”

It is required that all volunteers complete a criteria questionnaire prior to partaking in this study. If you are interested in participating in this study, please click on the link below <http:xxxxxxxxxxxxx>, and complete the criteria questionnaire. Volunteers meeting the criteria and selected to partake in the study will receive via email “the informed consent form,” that must be returned within the indicated time, along with their availability for the interview.

Thank you

Rosalind D. Sawyer  
Doctoral Candidate, Walden University

## Appendix B: Criteria Questionnaire

## The Lack of African American Women CEOs in Corporate America

Participant:

Date:

Location:

Email address:

1. What is your gender?

Male \_\_\_\_\_

Female \_\_\_\_\_

2. How do you self- identify?

Caucasian \_\_\_\_\_

Black/ African American \_\_\_\_\_

Asian \_\_\_\_\_

Latino \_\_\_\_\_

3. Which age group do you fall in?

35 – 45 \_\_\_\_\_

45 – 55 \_\_\_\_\_

56 and over \_\_\_\_\_

4. What is your present job title?

\_\_\_\_\_

5. How many years of experience do you have in a mid to upper-managerial role?

7 – 10 yrs. \_\_\_\_\_

More than 10 yrs. \_\_\_\_\_

6. Are you presently/ or previously employed with a Fortune 500 company, a part of corporate America?
7. Do you aspire to a chief executive officer position?
- Yes \_\_\_\_\_
- No \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix C: Informed Consent Form

### The Lack of African American Women CEOs in Corporate America

You are invited to take part in a research study on The Lack Of African American Women Chief Executive Officers, in Corporate America. The purpose of this study is to examine the lived experiences and perceptions of African American women who aspire to be chief executive officers in corporate America. The experiences and perceptions of these women will be examined to obtain a better understanding as to why there continues to be a limited number of African American women chief executive officers in corporate America, despite the increase of African American women in executive level roles. The study aims to add to the existing literature about the lack of African American Women Chief Executive Officers in Corporate America. The research findings may provide information that could increase the number of women, especially African American women in chief executive officer positions. The researcher is inviting African American women in mid to upper - managerial level positions as managers, senior managers, directors, senior directors, vice presidents, presidents, and aspire to a chief executive officer position. The criteria for the study is African American women aspiring to a chief executive officer position, at least 35 years of age with a minimum of 7 years of experience in a mid to upper - managerial position of a Fortune 500 company, a part of corporate America, in the United States. This form is part of a process called “informed consent” to allow you to understand this study before deciding whether to take part. Prior to participating in this study all interested parties were required to complete a criteria questionnaire, which was attached to the initial request for participants

A researcher by the name of, Rosalind D. Sawyer whom is a doctoral student at Walden University, is conducting this study.

#### **Background Information:**

The Lack Of African American Women CEOs, in Corporate America has been the topic of various research studies. Though, research reveals that over the last 10 years, African American women presence in executive level positions have increased, they are still underrepresented in chief executive officer roles in Fortune 500 companies, a part of corporate America, in the United States. This study will examine and describe the lived experiences and perceptions of African American women aspiring to chief executive officer positions in Fortune 500 companies, a part of corporate America, in the United States.

#### **Procedures:**

If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to:

Partake in one video recorded interview consisting of one central research question and four open-ended sub-questions, which will take place via GoToMeeting®, and last approximately 45 – 60 minutes.

Participate in member checking by reviewing the raw data and analysis that will be emailed to you for review. Please clarify if the themes and categories are sufficient, make sense, and if what you meant in relation to your lived experiences were captured.

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

This study is voluntary. If you decide to join the study now, you can still change your mind later.

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

Being in this type of study involves some risk of the minor discomforts that can be encountered in daily life, such as stress, frustration, or anger. Being in this study would not pose risk to your safety or wellbeing.

Participation in the study might not directly benefit you, however, a possible benefit from your participation is the knowledge provided by yourself and other African American women's life experiences that effectively prepared you and them with the capabilities to maneuver through multiple social and cultural environments. Another benefit is that lived experiences of African American women aspiring to this role will assist all women pursuing chief executive officer positions in corporate America.

### **Payment:**

Participants will not receive payments of any kind for partaking in the study.

### **Privacy:**

Any information you provide will be kept confidential. The researcher will not use your personal information for any purposes outside of this research project. In addition, the researcher will not include your name or anything else that could identify you in the study reports. Data will be kept secure by a home computer in my place of residence, on an encrypted file on an external USB drive, and all of the transcripts and audio recordings will be locked in file cabinets at the researcher's place of residence. All of the data collected and related to the study, manuscripts, emails, and journals will be stored and locked in the researcher's personnel file cabinet purchased for this purpose. Data will be kept for a period of at least 5 years, or as required by the university.

### **Contacts and Questions:**



You may ask any questions you have now, or if you have questions later, you may contact the researcher via telephone (754) 244-1481 or email rosalindsawyer@comcast.net. If you want to talk privately about your rights as a participant, you can call Dr. Leilani Endicott. She is the Walden University representative who can discuss this with you. Her phone number is 612-312-1210 (for US based participants) OR 001-612-312-1210 (for participants outside the US). Walden University's approval number for this study is **05-14-14-0182930** and it expires on **May 13, 2015**.

Within 24 hours of receipt of your, "I consent" e-mail, you will receive the research questions in an e-mail in advance for review

Please keep/print a copy of this informed consent form for your records.

**Statement of Consent:**

I have read the above information and I feel I understand the study well enough to make a decision about my involvement. By replying to this email with the words, "I consent, I understand that I am agreeing to the terms described above.

## Appendix D: Interview Protocol

### The Lack of African American Women CEOs in Corporate America

Participant:

Date:

Location:

The purpose of this study is to examine the lived experiences and perceptions of African American women who aspire to be chief executive officers in corporate America. The experiences and perceptions of these women will be examined to obtain a better understanding as to why there continues to be a limited number of African American women chief executive officers in corporate America, despite the increase of African American women in executive level roles. The study aims to add to the existing literature about The lack of African American Women CEOs in Corporate America. The research findings may provide information that could increase the number of women, especially African American women in chief executive officer positions. The central research question in this study will focus on the lived experiences of African American women aspiring to chief executive officer positions in Fortune 500 companies, a part of corporate America. In addition, the four sub-questions will examine perceptions African American women have in regards their increased presence in executive level positions, and yet, continue to be underrepresented in chief executive officer roles in corporate America.

Participating in this study is strictly voluntary. If at any time you choose to discontinue your participation in the study, you can do so without defamation of character. There are no conceivable risks associated to you in regards to partaking in this study. Rosalind D. Sawyer, the interviewer, will not include your identity and all information obtained is confidential.

#### **Central Research Question:**

What are the lived experiences of African American women aspiring to chief executive officer positions in Fortune 500 companies, a part of corporate America?

#### **Sub-questions**

1. What contributed to the increase of African American women in positions as directors, senior directors, vice presidents, and senior vice presidents in corporate America?

2. How did these factors contribute to the increase of African American women in directors, senior directors, vice presidents, and senior vice president's positions in corporate America?
3. What apparent factors play a part in the lack of African American women in chief executive officer positions in Fortune 500 companies, a part of corporate America?
4. Describe how these factors play a role in the lack of African American women in chief executive officer positions, in corporate America.