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# Senior-Level African American Women, Underrepresentation, and Career Decision-Making

Marquita Barron  
*Walden University*

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# Walden University

College of Management and Technology

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Marquita T. Barron

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Review Committee

Dr. Jean Gordon, Committee Chairperson, Management Faculty  
Dr. Robert DeYoung, Committee Member, Management Faculty  
Dr. Lisa Barrow, University Reviewer, Management Faculty

Chief Academic Officer  
Eric Riedel, Ph.D.

Walden University  
2019

Abstract

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Making

by

Marquita T. Barron

MA, University of Cincinnati, 2009

BA, University of Cincinnati, 2007

Proposal Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Management

Walden University

December 2018

## Abstract

In 2015, 0.2% of African American women were in chief executive officer (CEO) roles and 1.2% were in executive or senior-level roles within a 500 Standard & Poor's (S&P) organization. African American women's lived experiences are underutilized by organizational and human resources (HR) leaders in the development and implementation of recruitment, talent development, diversity and inclusion, and succession planning strategies. The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to understand lived experiences regarding career advancement decision-making strategies for senior-level African American women. The conceptual framework used was social cognitive career theory (SCCT), which addresses the 'what' and 'how' of career development and behaviors across one's life span. The central research questions were about participants' decisions-making strategies used to attain senior-level management positions and how the facets of SCCT impacted their decision-making processes. Snowball sampling was the purposeful strategy used for recruiting 12 African American women who serve/served in a senior-level position within an organization. The data collections sources included interviews and field notes. By deductive and inductive coding, the main themes uncovered were leadership, family, education, authenticity, and faith. The results of this study may benefit organizational and HR leaders as they consider improvement opportunities for their recruitment, talent management, diversity and inclusion policies and programs, and succession planning strategies, inclusive of internal and college recruitment, involvement in community youth initiatives, and strategic alignment of high-level, internal organizational stakeholders.

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## Dedication

In loving memory of my mother, Janice D. Lail. By modeling the way for pursuing educational and professional excellence, you embolden all of your daughters with the ideology of what is possible for African American women. This is also in loving memory of my father, Emmitt H. Lail, who expressed love for me from the beginning of my life and then encouragement until his last breath. I miss you both.

I further dedicate this dissertation to the 12 African American women, who participated in this study. Your acceptance of my invitation to share your leadership pursuit and progression may prove to be of great benefit to all those who will read about and learn from your lessons learned. Thank you so much for your time and honesty in support of my topic and doctoral journey.

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I must first acknowledge the blessings that the Lord has given me. He has given me the strength and courage to persevere. My faith in Him is strong, which will enable me to accomplish many more things in the future.

At an early age, my grandmother, Ann C. Byrd, recognized my potential to do wonderful works and continued through my life to encourage and inspire me. I love you so much for the guidance and unconditional love that you provided and am so very proud that you are my Nana. To my husband, Roosevelt Barron, whom I love more than the day I met you because you continuously enabled me to pursue my dreams. You are my rock and my love. To my children, Rodney Chatman, II, Cassandra M.D. Barron, and Keenan D. Barron, I love you and hope that I make you proud to be my children. To my sisters, who encouraged me to be at the top of my game, I love and thank you. To my aunt Shirley Byrd and uncle Kenneth Byrd, I appreciate your support especially with the longtime noticeable missing of your sister and my mother through this journey. I thank family and friends for your support and kind words along this journey. Finally, a big thanks to Dr. Jean Gordon and Dr. Robert DeYoung for your guidance, patience, honesty, and support in making this journey exceptional. Also, a thanks to Lisa Barrow for your specialization in editing my study. I appreciate that God placed each of you in my life, which made this journey possible.

## Table of Contents

List of Tables .....	vi
List of Figures .....	vii
Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study.....	1
Background.....	2
Underrepresentation of Women.....	3
Underrepresentation of African American Women .....	4
Regulations and Diversity.....	5
Organizational Praise in Midst of Underrepresentation.....	6
Identified Challenges and Barriers in Diversity.....	6
Problem Statement .....	8
Purpose of the Study .....	9
Research Questions .....	10
Conceptual Framework for the Study.....	10
Nature of the Study .....	13
Design. ....	13
Methodology .....	15
Definitions.....	16
Assumptions.....	17
Scope and Delimitations .....	18
Limitations .....	19
Significance.....	20



Social Change Initiative .....	21
Summary .....	22
Chapter 2: Literature Review .....	24
Introduction.....	24
Literature Search Strategy.....	28
Conceptual Framework.....	29
Diversity as a Management Issue .....	30
Evolution of Diversity.....	31
Regulatory Remedies Towards Diversity .....	32
Diversity and Issues from an Organizational Perspective .....	34
Organizational and HR Approach to Diversity.....	39
Effective Management of Diversity.....	41
New Path to Explore Regarding Diversity.....	42
Literature on SCCT.....	44
Self-Efficacy .....	45
Outcome Expectations .....	52
Personal Goals .....	53
Decision-Making Process .....	54
Summary and Conclusions .....	55
Chapter 3: Research Method.....	57
Introduction.....	57
Research Design and Rationale .....	57

Phenomenology.....	58
Research Questions.....	59
Role of the Researcher .....	59
Observer, Participant, or Observer-Participant.....	60
Personal and Professional Connection.....	62
Managing Research Bias.....	62
Addressing Ethical Issues .....	63
Methodology.....	65
Participant Selection Logic.....	66
Instrumentation .....	68
Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection.....	71
Data Analysis Plan.....	75
Issues of Trustworthiness.....	78
Ethical Procedures .....	80
Summary.....	83
Chapter 4: Results .....	85
Introduction.....	85
Research Setting.....	86
Demographics .....	87
Data Collection .....	87
Interview Pre-Work .....	88
Interview Day.....	89

Interview Post-Work.....	90
Field Notes .....	91
Data Analysis .....	93
Coding Process and Tool .....	94
Emergent Themes .....	95
Evidence of Trustworthiness.....	95
Results.....	98
Demographical Insights .....	101
RQ1.....	102
RQ2.....	112
Summary .....	129
Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations.....	131
Introduction.....	131
Interpretation of the Findings.....	132
Finding 1: Lack of Diversity.....	132
Finding 2: Perceptions of Unfairness.....	133
Finding 3: Formal and Informal Expectations .....	134
Finding 4: Career Decision-Making .....	135
Finding 5: Work to Achieve a Higher-Level Role.....	137
Finding 6: Career Delays .....	138
Finding 7: Excitement About Future Possibilities .....	139
Limitations of the Study.....	140

Recommendations.....	141
Recommendation One: Reimagine Youth Outreach Initiatives.....	142
Recommendation Two: Reimagine and Synergize Diversity and Inclusion Strategies.....	143
Recommendation Three: Be More Intentional About College Recruitment .....	144
Implications.....	145
Positive Social Change .....	146
Implications for Practice .....	147
Contribution to the Literature and Future Studies .....	148
Conclusion .....	149
References.....	152
Appendix: Interview Protocol - Scripts & Questions .....	173

## List of Tables

Table 1. List of Potential Issues and Actions..... 74

Table 2. Demographical Insights of Participants..... 101

## List of Figures

Figure 1. Hierarchy of themes for RQ1 and RQ2 via NVivo 12. ....	102
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## Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Organizational and human resource (HR) leaders play a critical role in the success of an organization. Part of that role includes developing and putting forth strategies that align with organizational goals and the future direction of the organization (Allen, French, & Poteet, 2016). To develop these strategies, many organizational and HR leaders have acknowledged the increase of change in the demographics of the workforce and have made efforts toward implementing best practices to better engage women and ethnic groups (Allen et al., 2016; Holder, Jackson, & Ponterotto, 2015). Organizational and HR leaders also must be cognizant of federal and state laws in relation to this change in demographics, potentially through their use of Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) representatives (Graham, Belliveau, & Hotchkiss, 2016; Holder et al., 2015; Scheuermann, Tokar, & Hall, 2014).

To better reflect the change in workforce demographics and the external environment of the organization, organizational and HR leaders have adjusted strategies toward implementing policies, practices, and programs to address the lack of promotional opportunities for women and ethnic groups in senior-level positions (Allen et al., 2016; Downs, 2015; Graham et al., 2016; Gündemir, Dovidio, Homan, & De Dreu, 2016; Kulik, 2014; Nkomo & Hoobler, 2014). They must also realize that a one-size-fits-all approach to policies and practices is not a solution to improving or increasing the diversity within the organization (Beckwith, Carter, & Peters, 2016). Although many organizations have established programs and changes to policies and practices that are essential to addressing the underrepresentation of ethnic groups, there is still a lack of

diversity in senior-level positions, specifically for African American women (Johns, 2013).

Though there are many researchers (see Allen et al., 2016; Beckwith et al., 2016; Gündemir et al., 2016; Johns, 2013; Nkomo & Hoobler, 2014; Holder et al., 2015; Scheuermann et al., 2014) who have examined and explored the lack of diversity in senior-level positions, there still exists a lack of diversity in senior-level positions within organizations (Fouad & Santana, 2017). Within the literature, there is a minimal number of studies on understanding the career advancement decision-making strategies of senior-level African American women concerning the lack of diversity in senior-level positions. The focus of this study was to explore the lived experiences (personal and professional) of senior-level African American women to gain this understanding through a social cognitive career theory (SCCT) lens concerning the lack of diversity in senior-level positions.

### **Background**

Workplace diversity is an important topic in the field of management. Traditionally subscribed to a group, diversity is about the acknowledgement of differences (e.g. race, gender, culture, religion, or education and socioeconomic background) (Qin, Muenjohn, & Chhetri, 2013). The definition of diversity depends on the attribute of visible interest (e.g. race, gender), also considered social identity, or invisible interest (e.g. educational or socioeconomic background) and whether that interest is at the aggregate (group) level or individualistic demographic level (Byrd, 2014; Mahadeo, Soobaroyen & Hanuman, 2012; Qin et al., 2013). The Board of Governors of



the Federal Reserve System (FRS, 2016) specified that diversity referred to women and minorities, but also indicated that entities could expand the definition to include social identities, including sexual orientation, age, and disability. From an organizational perspective, diversity is also about creating a heterogeneous environment, which is a driver for greater quality of creativity, innovation, decision-making, and financial progression (Galinsky et al., 2015; Mahadeo et al., 2012; Qin et al., 2013). The focus of this section is the duality attribute or intersectionality of a group of people (i.e. African American and a woman) and of singularity (i.e. African American or a woman) viewpoints.

### **Underrepresentation of Women**

The U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) and the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) provided data that illustrated a history of slow participatory increases in the management and professional careers for women. The BLS (2004) reported that women made up 22% of these management/professional type roles in 1983 and that increased to 34% in 2002. With what appeared to be a significant increase of women in these roles from 1983 to 2002, the more current data about these roles indicated that this increase has leveled off. The participation of women in management, professional, and similar careers was 51% for 2009 (BLS, 2010), 2010 (Aguilar, 2013), and 2013 (BLS, 2014) and then 52% in 2014 (BLS, 2015).

When looking specifically at a senior-level role, such as the (e.g. chief executive, chief information, or chief financial), there is data that depicts a diversity issue with the lack of women in this type of high-level position. In 2010, women held 16% of the total

number of board director roles in Fortune 500 organizations (Aguilar, 2013). The total number of chief executives in 2013 was 1,520, with 26.8% of those roles held by women (BLS, 2014). In 2014, the total number of chief executives increased to 1,603 positions, but the number of women decreased to 26.3%. Although women are participating in the workforce at an increased rate (Davis & Maldonado, 2015), the data illustrates a difference in the participation of women within managerial, professional, and similar careers (BLS, 2004), inclusive of C-suite roles, when specifically examining the compilation of gender and race/ethnicity or from a dual social identity (i.e. African American woman) perspective.

### **Underrepresentation of African American Women**

From a dual social identity perspective, African American women traditionally have seen a small percentage increase of representation in management, professional, and similar careers. The BLS (2014) reported that 43% of White/European and 48% of Asian women were more likely than African American women (34%) to be employed in higher paying management, professional, and similar careers. Many of those careers would fall into the category of senior-level positions. In 2014, the BLS (2015) reported that 43% of White/European and 49% of Asian women were more likely than African American women (35%) to be employed in higher paying management, professional, and similar careers. In 2015, 0.2% of African American women were in a CEO role and 1.2% were in an executive or senior-level role within a 500 S&P organization (Catalyst, 2015). Across various industries, African American women do not experience equality in senior-level positions.

## **Regulations and Diversity**

The financial services industry is one of the many industries that lacks diversity in senior-level positions and was used here as an example. Although there have been multiple laws implemented due to issues with diversity within the workplace, such as the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) Act of 1972, there is one within this past century specific to the financial services industry. The implementation of Section 342 of the Dodd-Frank Wall Street Reform and Consumer Protection Act of 2010 was to facilitate improvement in the financial services industry regarding diversity in the workplace and specifically in senior-level positions (FRS, 2016). This facilitation was not only within privately owned entities, such as the Bank of America and Citigroup, but also public or governmental agencies, such as the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation (FDIC).

Legislators have a history of furthering the cause of organizational diversity, particularly in the three periods of 1960s – 1970s, 1980s, and 1990 – 2013. The 1990s, for example, was a period where legislators made diversity an imperative for many businesses to solve for the lack of factory workers during World War II with signage of an executive order (Nkomo & Hoobler, 2014; Qin et al., 2013). In 2009, the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) began to require publicly traded companies to disclose information in their proxy statement about the company's diversity policy and the diversity makeup of their board of directors.

## **Organizational Praise in Midst of Underrepresentation**

As organizational leaders complied with regulatory requirements and realized the benefits of a diverse workforce, they then began to receive public recognition due to what were deemed improvements towards diversity. Organizations within the financial services industry also received such recognition but fell short. Catalyst (2013) said the top U.S. financial services entities had the broadest diversity within its workforce. These numbers still reflected the underrepresentation of African Americans on Fortune 500 boards, which traditionally consist of White/European men. For example, Bank of America Corporation had one African American on the board among 13 total directors. Citigroup had two African Americans among 13 total directors. Wells Fargo had one African American among 16 total directors. Prudential Financial had the most on a board, with three African Americans among 13 total directors. U.S. Bancorp had two African Americans among 15 total directors. The number of African American women in director positions have decreased between the years 2007 and 2011 from 6.5% to 6.3% (Catalyst, 2015).

## **Identified Challenges and Barriers in Diversity**

Similar to the private sector, the public sector also has issues with diversity in senior-level positions. Underrepresentation in the federal government and the very organizations that enforce equal employment opportunities and non-discrimination exist. In recognition of this issue, the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) hired a workgroup in 2010 to ascertain what equal employment challenges and barriers still existed at a federal level. Many of the challenges regarding the private sector

were the same at the federal level. These challenges identified through the EEOC (2013) included caregiver obligations not recognized via organizational policies, lack of leader support to perpetuate equal opportunity to advance, type of position or career bias, pay inequality, unconscious bias resulting in homogeneous recruitment and selection, and lack of support at the various federal organizations' senior level.

The United States has made strides in improving employment equality for African American women, which required amendments and additional laws to holistically make improvements. The data from the BLS (2004, 2010, 2013, 2014, 2015) illustrated the growth of women and minorities in the workforce and progression towards male-dominated careers, such as law, engineering, and financial services. Although there are many laws in place to encourage workforce diversity and organizational leaders insist on having done a great deal for workforce diversity, there still exists a problem regarding how African American women have historically experienced opportunities for career advancement into senior-level positions.

Organizational and HR leaders are responsible for several key elements of an organization. Those responsibilities include identifying areas within the organization that require future key talent, anticipating future skills necessary for key positions, taking time to carefully select high potential candidates, and facilitating focused development of those candidates (Kowalewski, Moretti, & McGee, 2011). They must also consider how best to put forth a plan that aligns with organizational goals and the future direction of the organization (Kowalewski et al., 2011). Without understanding the perspectives of African American women, particularly those at the senior level, there is a missed

opportunity for organizational and HR leaders to continuously improve their commitment towards increased diversity in senior-level positions (Galinsky et al., 2016; Harjoto, Laksmana, & Lee, 2015; Triana, Jayasinghe, & Pieper, 2015). Leaders fail when the focus is on the most common views of diversity, which is a mono-attribute perspective (or concern for one attribute such as gender or woman), versus a multiple attribute perspective (concern for multiple attributes) (Qin et al., 2013).

### **Problem Statement**

The changing demographics within the United States have led to discussions regarding the underrepresentation of that change in senior-level positions, which has not led to a representative increase of women in senior-level positions. For example, chief executives in 2013 totaled 1,520 with 26.8% of those roles held by women (BLS, 2014). In 2014, the total number of chief executives increased to 1,603 positions, but the percentage of women decreased to 26.3%. The general problem is the underrepresentation of women in senior-level positions.

The underrepresentation of women in senior-level positions is even more striking when looking specifically at African American women. In 2012, for example, African American women represented 9.2% of the board seats in Fortune 100 organizations and 7.4% in Fortune 500 organizations (Catalyst, 2013). In 2015, 0.2% of African American women were in a CEO role and 1.2% were in an executive or senior-level role within a 500 S&P organization (Catalyst, 2015). Beckwith et al. (2016) described topics in literature involving understanding the lack of diversity in senior-level positions as: workplace and societal norms (e.g. stereotyping, discrimination, and marginalization),

strategic career choices, lack of support or mentorship from leadership, challenge of duality faced by African American women, and feelings of isolation as a singular representation of African American women at the executive level. As there appears to be a missed opportunity to put specificity around inclusion of key perspectives towards policy development (Davis & Maldonado, 2015; Galinsky et al., 2015) whether in the public or private sectors, the specific problem is the underutilization of African American women's perspectives by organizational and human resources leaders in how they devise and implement recruitment, talent development, diversity and inclusion, and succession planning strategies.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to understand lived experiences regarding career advancement decision-making strategies for senior-level African American women. Through exploration of these strategies, the results may provide an opportunity for organizational and HR leaders to reconsider the effectiveness of their policies, programs, and strategies. This may also raise an awareness for other individuals, particularly African American women, of potential inputs and outputs of career decisions. The social cognitive career theory (SCCT), which is an extension of Bandura's (1986) social cognitive theory, assisted in evaluating the data of this study regarding the career decision-making strategies of senior-level African American women. Semi-structured interviews were used as the method to explore these lived experiences and uncover themes to better understand decision-making strategies from participants in various industries.

## **Research Questions**

Research questions in a qualitative study serve as the connection between what a researcher wants to know or understand as well as a template for how a researcher initiates the interviews (Maxwell, 2013). The questions described serve as the overarching or central questions that enable conceptualization of a phenomenon and potential for a sufficient number of themes to emerge versus limiting the breadth of research results (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). The element of focus for this study was decision-making with an SCCT lens. The participant pool consisted of 12 participants. The central questions for this study are as follows:

*RQ1:* What decisions-making strategies do African American women use to attain senior-level management positions?

*RQ2:* How have facets of social cognitive career theory (SCCT) (e.g. self-efficacy beliefs, outcome expectations, and personal goals) impacted the decision-making process of African American women for career advancement?

## **Conceptual Framework for the Study**

Theory in qualitative research involves the researcher gaining insight regarding a phenomenon and understanding how participants in the study understand or perceive the phenomenon (Maxwell, 2013). To transcend beyond what is already known, the researcher must be open to the emergence of new knowledge by considering, for example, that two concepts (thought to be unrelated) could have a link or relationship (Gioia, Corley, & Hamilton, 2013; Maxwell, 2013). The conceptual framework in



Chapter 1 provides a high-level view of the SCCT lens through which I conducted this study.

The framework to explore the research questions was SCCT. SCCT is an extension of Bandura's social cognitive theory and consists of a three-pronged model regarding career development and behavior that includes interest development, choice-making/decision-making, and performance and persistence (Dickinson, Abrams, & Tokar, 2016; Lent & Brown, 2013; Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994; Leung, 2008; Lim, Lent, & Penn, 2016; Scheuermann et al., 2014).

The primary intent of SCCT is to address content and process facets, or the what and how, of career development and behaviors across one's life span (Lent & Brown, 2013; Lim et al., 2016). SCCT helps to answer what factors influenced an individual to pursue, for example, a senior-level position (Lim et al., 2016). An individual may consider a specific career or position of interest based on a set of factors, such as the probability of succeeding in a senior-level position (Lent & Brown, 2013). The content (career development) facets refer to questions pertaining to what occupation, vocation, or career would an individual gravitate toward or prefer to engage, as well as found or experienced satisfaction/wellbeing and success in that choice of a career. At a process level, which is reflective of one's decision-making as well as performance and persistence, SCCT helps to answer how an individual can achieve attainment of a senior-level position and cope with various challenges (e.g. lack of support from leadership or family) as part of that process (Lim et al., 2016). The process (career behavior) facets

refer to how individuals elected or decided upon their career strategies and adapted to the realities of change and challenges in the pursuit of a career.

The factors, or cognitive-person variables, that play a part in how individuals self-regulate their behavior towards their career decision-making strategies include self-efficacy beliefs, outcome expectations, and personal goals (Albert & Luzzo, 1999; Inda Rodríguez, & Peña, 2013; Lent & Brown, 2013; Lent & Hackett, 2006). These factors are key to the identified problem of this study as retrieval of knowledge or experience, based on beliefs, values, or understanding of the problem or collection of information helps to facilitate the decision-making process (Nachmias & Walmsley, 2015; Saaty, 2008; Wright, Perrone-McGovern, Boo, & White, 2014). From a career perspective, past performance and experience have an impact on an individual's level of career optimism which then impacts how and why individuals make career decisions throughout their lifespans (Garcia, Restubog, Bordia, Bordia, & Roxas, 2015). As part of formulating career decision-making, individuals must consider their level of self-efficacy beliefs, outcome expectations, and personal goals toward successful attainment of a senior level position (Johns, 2013; Lent & Brown, 2013). SCCT was the framework to focus this study on those factors that influenced both the environment and participants with the determination of career advancement decisions. The inputs and outputs, inclusive of cognitive-person factors, of pursuing a senior-level position within an organization was the focus of the interview questions for African American women within the participant pool of this study.

### **Nature of the Study**

For this study, a qualitative design is ideal for exploring the lived experiences of African American women as an opportunity for organizational and human resources leaders to reassess how they devise and implement recruitment, talent development, diversity and inclusion, and succession planning strategies. This section includes an overview of the design and method of the study, such as the type of study and rationale, targeted population of the study and expected sample size, and instruments to assist with data collection and analysis..

### **Design**

The research design for this study is a qualitative phenomenological study. By conducting a qualitative study, there is the opportunity to explore phenomena in a naturalistic environment to understand or give meaning to the phenomenon through purposeful selection of participants, which for this study was the result of snowball sampling. This design is also an opportunity to perform an in-depth exploration of the phenomenon through additional probing via an interview process, data gathering, and analysis to uncover themes and better draw conclusions and recommendations (Patton, 2015).

A quantitative design was not appropriate for this study as there was no theoretic significance to the phenomenon considered, as the intent was not to test a theory. Participants typically do not have an opportunity to speak freely about or clarify a response to a question in a quantitative study as there is a survey involved without interactive conversation. This lack of opportunity within a quantitative study is due to the

close-ended questions produced in a survey to a large participant pool that allows for generalizations of the data versus a qualitative study with open-ended questions in an interview to a small participant pool for in-depth insight (Singh & Sharma, 2015).

The most appropriate design for this study was a qualitative phenomenological study. From a phenomenological perspective, this design provided an opportunity to listen to the lived experiences (personal and professional) of purposefully selected participants and gain in-depth insights into the perceptions, beliefs, and assumptions regarding the phenomenon (Patton, 2015; Reiter, Stewart, & Bruce, 2011). This study explored the lived experiences (personal and professional) of 12 senior-level African American women to understand their decision-making strategies toward career advancement. This study relied heavily on interviews to gain insight into the essence of the phenomenon and structured research questions to align with the what I wanted to know and through the lens of SCCT.

Although there were other qualitative research designs to possibly select, they did not allow for a similar exploration of the phenomenon. For example, the focus of grounded theory was to uncover an emergence of theory based on the data, which was not the focus of this study, and an ethnography inquiry was about exploring different facets related to the customs of individual people and cultures (Ritchie, Lewis, Nicholls, & Ormston, 2013). A case study helps to explore the 'how' and 'why' about the unit of analysis, bounded by a specific context (setting, time, concepts) and relies on various resources to derive an understanding of the phenomenon (Houghton, Casey, Shaw, & Murphy, 2013; Yin, 2003). Lastly, a narrative design uses a format closely to relay stories

of a nonfictional participant to dramatize experiences (Miles et al., 2014), where this study used the real lived experiences of the participants to understand the phenomenon.

### **Methodology**

The targeted participants for this study were African-American women currently or previously in a vice president role and higher. With the assistance two female VPs as resources, I was able to construct a list of participants that met the criteria for this study by using snowball sampling with a continuous process of newly identified participants referring other potential participants. I sent an introductory email to each identified individual to ask for their participation in the study and provide high-level information about the purpose of the study. I stored the eventual list of participants in a password-protected computer to ensure the confidentiality of participants.

For qualitative research, there is no formula to help determine the appropriate sample size, which makes selection of the appropriate sample size key to ensuring efficient collection of the data. A sample size of 20 participants was a typical number in research, but a smaller sample size of 12 to 20 or until data saturation would be sufficient, which could be the point at which responses become redundant or recurring themes emerge for each research question (Cleary, Horsfall, & Hayter, 2014). The right sample size would minimize spending time on gathering data from too large of a sample size, with little change to results that a smaller sample could provide. The sample size selected was a minimum of 12 participants or until a level of data saturation was achieved to sufficiently attain a credible study.

The data from the interviews were recorded, transcribed, and then entered into qualitative data analysis software (QDAS). The use of NVivo, which is a computer assisted qualitative data analysis (CAQDAS) tool, enabled ease of triangulation of the data and increased the quality of data and the credibility of the study. For this study, I used the latest version of the tool, which was NVivo 12. Deductive and inductive coding were used. The coding method allowed for being proactive and the reduction of time in classifying themes. Inductive coding allowed for being open to emerging themes during and after the data gathering (Cho & Lee, 2014; Maxwell, 2013). Because of the purpose of each coding method, the use of both was appropriate for this study.

### **Definitions**

*Cognitive:* Cognitive refers to one's ability to synthesize information about the environment to predict or visualize the likelihood of success that then influence behavior or actions resulting in experiences to learn from (Bandura, 2007).

*Decision-making strategies:* Decision-making strategies are the cognitive processes of determining appropriate alternatives or options to resolving a career problem (Lent & Brown, 2013).

*Outcome expectations:* Outcome expectations refer to the beliefs one has about the consequences (good or bad) of performing a particular act or task (Lent & Brown, 2013).

*SCCT content facets:* Content refers to factors that impact one's interest in a specific career or career path (Lent & Brown, 2013; Lim et al., 2016).

*SCCT process facets*: Process refers to career behaviors such as deciding, adapting, and pursuing (Lent & Brown, 2013; Lim et al., 2016).

*Self-efficacy*: Self-efficacy is the belief in one's ability towards performing a particular act or task (Lent & Brown, 2013).

### **Assumptions**

There were multiple assumptions for this study. One assumption was that participants provided in-depth and honest responses to all interview questions. As such, their responses would include valuable details regarding decision-making strategies towards any barriers or challenges experienced as well as successes. Their experiences of barriers and challenges would include stories regarding external or environmental barriers, as well as internal challenges. Participants' responses would be subjective. Participants would enter the interview session with an understanding that their responses were confidential as the consent form included wording to that effect. Although participants may have come from different socioeconomic backgrounds, there would be similarities involving experiences of all participants to assist with making recommendations to organizational and HR leaders pertaining to their policies, procedures, practices, and programs. Age was not part of the criteria because an assumption was that most participants would be over the age of 30 due to the time it takes to meet the qualifications to gain such a role. The assistance from two VPs enabled me to connect with 12 participants for this study.

An assumption was that the resulting data would be helpful to organizational and HR leaders, other African American women, and researchers for future use.

Organizational and HR leaders would reassess their policies, procedures, and programs pertaining to African American women and make applicable adjustments to improve their recruitment, talent management, diversity and inclusion, and succession planning strategies, as well as enhance their organizational capabilities towards sustaining a competitive advantage and living up to their promise of corporate social responsibility. One other assumption for this study was that it would serve as an opportunity to learn from the experiences of the participants so that others can better formulate more informed decisions towards career advancement in senior-level positions. Researchers would also have the opportunity to expand upon the finding and increase the transferability of the study.

### **Scope and Delimitations**

The scope of this study involved senior-level African American women located within the United States. The intended sampling size for this study consisted of a minimum of 12 participants until data saturation up to 20 participants. Two female VPs were the initial sources for locating the appropriate participants for this study. The exploration of the phenomenon consisted of using a qualitative phenomenological study approach to give voice to and understand the lived experiences (personal and professional) of the participants. A general interview protocol (semi-structured) was the interview approach, which was a cross between an informal and formal structured interview, to enable rapport between the interviewer and interviewee (see the Appendix). The intent of this study was not to examine all the ways in which the internal and external environment contributed to the lack of diversity in senior-level positions, but to explore



the career decision-making strategies of African American women and their career advancement to senior-level positions by listening to and accurately interpreting their lived experiences. Although the experiences of participants may have included barriers related to discrimination (e.g. racism, sexism), this study was not restricted to the challenges experienced during their career journey, but inclusive of all experiences, whether positive or negative, to gain a holistic picture of the phenomenon.

### **Limitations**

There were four limitations of this study. First, there was the limitation of locating the appropriate number of participants to achieve data saturation towards gaining meaningful insight into the phenomenon. I had to rely on the support of the VPs with their networks and subsequent networks through snowball sampling to achieve the goal of interviewing 12 African American women in senior-level positions, which took time because of the sampling process used. There was a need to look at current as well as past senior-level individuals to increase the probability of saturation. Participants may not have accurately expressed their experiences because events took place long ago. This study did not focus on the age of any of the participants to ensure the likelihood of gaining enough participation to achieve saturation, so future researchers may want to consider a specific age limitation to determine any difference in populations. The results of this study are not generalizable to the larger population of African American women. To increase opportunities for generalizability, future researchers may want to consider expanding a similar study to include a more global population of women and minorities.

As an African American woman within the workforce, I do not see many individuals who look like me in senior-level positions. My bias could have played a part in the outcome of this study. My self-awareness of this bias increased my ability to set aside any preconceived notions about the phenomenon and be open to the possibility of new information. I referred to the recordings of the participants interviews to reduce the potential of bias around the topic. The acknowledgement of bias and being self-aware was important to stipulate within this study. I recognized the need to perform fieldwork with what Patton (2015) described as empathetic neutrality. For example, though my personal and professional experiences regarding the phenomenon were helpful with having an understanding and appreciation of participants' experiences, I recognized the importance of exercising caring behavior from a neutral stance to ensure credible data collection. I was careful not to share my experiences with the participants and not sway their interpretations of their own experiences.

### **Significance**

This study fills a gap in understanding by exploring the lived experiences of senior-level African American women with a SCCT lens regarding their career decision-making strategies towards achieving senior-level positions. The uniqueness of this study pertained to extending research with an SCCT lens around a specific population in the workforce and their career decision-making strategies. The research approach for this study was a qualitative phenomenological study with a data collection method of semi-structured interviews and use of member checking, which was the process of clarifying and verifying the interpretation of the data via the participants for research credibility

(Baxter & Jack, 2008). A positive social change opportunity may exist by providing the results of this study to organizational and HR leaders as a means to reflect on and reconsider the effectiveness of their policies, programs, and strategies on recruitment, talent management, diversity and inclusion policies and programs, and succession planning, specifically for African American women. This may further lead to enhancing the career advancement experiences of African American women, thus increasing the organizational high potential participant pool and addressing the lack of diversity in senior-level positions. This study may expand the body of knowledge pertaining to career decision-making strategies and SCCT and provide an opportunity for other researchers to explore this phenomenon in a similar fashion within other industries or with other disparate impacted groups.

### **Social Change Initiative**

When a social issue exists in an organization, there is often a call for a positive social change. Positive social change refers to the transformative process whereby individuals, entities, or the environment make a change in thoughts and behaviors towards outcomes that are beneficial for those potentially impacted by the issue (Stephan, Patterson, Kelly, & Mair, 2016). Originators of social change and those potentially impacted may or may not exist within the current confines of an organization as they could be external initiators.

Change can arise through different mediums. From a diversity perspective, the levels of change must manifest structurally, culturally, or behaviorally (Stockdale & Crosby, 2004). Structure refers to formal organizational systems (e.g. policies, processes,

and strategies), culture refers to the belief systems or assumptions that exist within an organization, and behavior refers to those actions that organizational and HR leaders take through the formal (or informal) organizational system. The results of this study may benefit organizational and HR leaders as they consider improvement opportunities for their recruitment, talent management, diversity and inclusion policies and programs, and succession planning strategies. Understanding the experiences of identified senior-level African American women, other African American women may gain an enhanced perspective about the pursuit of a senior-level position, thus potentially increasing the candidate pool and diversity at senior levels within many organizations.

### **Summary**

Minority women, specifically African-American women, have a long history of experiencing inadequate representation in senior-level positions (Holder et al., 2015). From a historical perspective, race and gender relations in the U.S. shaped the environment and ideology within the United States, which carried over into the workplace. This ideology resulted in stereotypical views, beliefs, and practices, and exclusion of access to knowledge regarding career advancement and senior-level knowledgeable cohorts to help with the navigation process of the workplace political system (Angel, Killacky, & Johnson, 2013; DeCuir-Gunby & Gunby 2016; Johns, 2013). The purpose of this study was to fill a gap in the literature as there is lack of research regarding career advancement decision-making strategies of senior-level African American women and lack of diversity in senior-level positions. By understanding the process by which individuals, specifically African American women, made their career

decisions using an SCCT lens, there may exist a social change opportunity for organizational and HR leaders to reflect on and reconsider the effectiveness of their policies, programs, and strategies on recruitment, talent management, diversity and inclusion policies and programs, and succession planning. In turn, this reconsideration may enhance the career advancement experiences of African American women, thus increasing the high potential participant pool and addressing the lack of diversity in senior-level positions. A more detailed discussion regarding SCCT, career decision-making strategies, and the lack of diversity in senior-level positions follows in Chapter 2. Chapter 3 covers the design of the study, details of the selected participant pool, and the process for interviewing the participants.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### **Introduction**

Changing demographics within the United States have led to discussions about lack of change in senior-level positions within organizations, specifically for African American women. In 2012, African American women represented 9.2% of the board seats in Fortune 100 organizations and 7.4% of Fortune 500 organizations (Catalyst, 2013). In 2015, 0.2% of African American women were in a CEO role and 1.2% were in an executive or senior-level role within a 500 S&P organization (Catalyst, 2015). U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) (2013) reported the number of African American women in senior-level positions within the financial services industry declined from 6.5% to 6.3% between 2007 and 2011.

Although there are many researchers who examined and explored the lack of diversity in senior-level positions (e.g. Allen et al., 2016; Gündemir et al., 2016; Nkomo & Hoobler, 2014; Holder et al., 2015; Scheuermann et al., 2014), there still exists a lack of diversity in senior-level positions within organizations. Duffy et al. (2013) suggested additional research with an SCCT lens on a population in the workforce. Inda et al. (2013) recommended similar extension of research from a decision-making perspective with a qualitative design. The specific research problem was the underutilization of African American women's perspectives by organizational and HR leaders in how they devised and implemented recruitment, talent development, diversity and inclusion, and succession planning strategies. The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to understand the lived experiences of senior-level African American women

regarding their career advancement decision-making strategies. Through the exploration of these strategies, the results may provide an opportunity for organizational and HR leaders to reconsider the effectiveness of their policies, programs, and strategies.

Organizational and HR leaders rely on metrics or analytics particularly when making decisions about the human resources of the organization (McNulty & Cieri, 2013). This study may also raise awareness for other individuals, particularly African American women, regarding potential inputs and outputs of career advancement decisions. The conceptual framework for this study was SCCT, which assisted in the development of my interview protocol and evaluation of the results. The two research questions for this study were as follows: What decisions-making strategies do African American women use to attain senior-level management positions? How have facets of SCCT impacted the decision-making processes of African American women regarding career advancement?

Many studies consisted of a participant pool of students or individuals who newly entered the workforce, and a limited number of studies involved senior level African American women through a SCCT lens. Bullock-Yowell, McConnell, and Schedin (2014) investigated the career level concern of decided versus undecided college students by looking at the difficulties experienced with career decision-making self-efficacy, negative career thinking, and career decision-making. Di Fabio and Saklofske (2014) performed a quantitative study of students in the Tuscan school system ranging in age from 16 to 19 to examine the relationship between emotional intelligence (i.e. fluid intelligence and personality traits) and career decision-making processes including career decision-making self-efficacy, career indecision, and indecisiveness. DiDonato and

Strough (2013) examined the relationship between gender-typed attitudes towards preferred occupations to the actual decisions of academic major and occupation selections. Fouad and Santana (2017) uncovered factors that may provide insight into the science, technology, engineering, arts, and math (STEAM) career choices and work decisions of women and minorities from middle school through graduate school. Davis (2016) presented the one qualitative study pertaining to African American women within academia and business and their journey to become senior or elite leaders with an intersectionality lens but not an SCCT lens, specific to their decision-making strategies, or any specificity of the types of business industries. Yeagley et al. (2010) conducted a study regarding perceptions of leadership pursuit and SCCT and expressed the need for further research with a more mature, careered participant pool. These and other literary source consisted of works in which to perform a literature review.

A literature review can assist a researcher to find gaps in the literature and determine future research. It illustrates what was currently known about a phenomenon to then present an argument towards the need to expand upon the literature (Machi & McEvoy, 2016). A literature review is more than looking at or reviewing literature and providing a summary of what was reviewed (Walden University, n.d.a). A literature review is more than using Google to find a multitude of articles for the sake of having a multitude of articles (Laureate Education, 2006). The purpose of a literature review is for a researcher to use cognitive skills (e.g. analysis, synthesis, and evaluation) in the review of past literature to ascertain where there could be a contribution to the literature (American Psychological Association, 2010; Laureate Education, 2006; Maxwell, 2013;



Rowe, 2014; Walden University, n.d.a). When looking through past materials to analyze which relate to the problem of interest a researcher then synthesizes the materials to determine potential gaps in the literature and evaluates the most purposefully selected path to extend or fill a gap in the literature.

One of the gaps in the literature, as identified by Gardner Jr et al. (2014), pertained to the lack of comparison in terms of career development and advancement between African American women and men versus the typical research of comparing African American women and White/European women. An additional identified gap in the literature was the comparison between men and women in the hospitality field and in terms of the level of issues or barriers because of the glass-ceiling effect versus self-imposed issues or barriers experienced (Boone et al., 2013). Another gap was [rewrite this sentence to name and explain a specific gap in literature instead of vague unrelated language]

The specific gap in the literature resulting in this study was the lack of understanding the lived experiences of senior-level African American women regarding career advancement decision-making strategies through an SCCT lens. As such, Chapter 2 covers three areas: literature strategy, conceptual framework, and literature review. The literature strategy section involves a detailed description of the strategies used to locate the literature for this study. The conceptual framework section is a description of the lens of this study and its application in relation to the purpose of this study. The literature review section is an exhaustive review of the literature regarding the underrepresentation of African American women in senior level positions, as well as the lack of understanding

of the effective and ineffective decision-making strategies of senior level African American women to improve how organizational and HR leaders think about their policies, practices, and programs, and the use of SCCT as the conceptual framework.

### **Literature Search Strategy**

The literature search strategy used to locate relevant references for this study consisted of conventional searches through books and technological or electronic searchers. Over the years and through the course of my scholarly journey, I have an accumulation of books that include materials about the types of research designs and methodologies, steps to complete a literature review, and elements of human resources and diversity in the workplace. The main electronic tool used for locating related peer-reviewed journals was within the Walden University Library and the use of Google Scholar, which are search engines for locating scholarly works across databases and disciplines. The resulting databases included, but not limited to, Sage Journals, ScienceDirect, Business Source Complete, ProQuest Central, Academic Search Complete, Taylor & Francis, and EBSCOhost. The keywords used to locate peer-reviewed journals included *diversity, workplace diversity, history of diversity, underrepresentation and African American, underrepresentation and African American women, underrepresentation and women, glass ceiling, social cognitive career theory, lack of diversity and social cognitive career theory, SCCT and African American women, decision-making, career decision-making, decision-making strategies, career decision-making strategies, self-efficacy, career self-efficacy, outcome expectations and careers, senior positions, senior-level roles, senior-level roles and African American women,*

*human resources and African American women, employment and African Americans, self-efficacy and African American women, qualitative research, phenomenology, phenomenological research, and case study.* The rationale for the number of keyword searches, which is not all-inclusive, was because I found there was little inference in the literature directly connecting the need to understand the career advancement decision-making strategies of senior-level African American women concerning the lack of diversity in senior-level positions as indicated by Duffy et al., 2013 and Inda et al., 2013. This sentiment was similarly expressed by McNulty and Cieri (2013) in that there was a small number of literary works about how African American pursued careers and persevered.

### **Conceptual Framework**

SCCT was the conceptual framework for this research study. Lent, Brown, and Hackett introduced SCCT in 1994 to unify established theories pertaining to career development (Lent et al., 2006) and to expand upon Bandura's (1986) social cognitive theory (SCT). SCCT consists of a three-pronged model regarding career development and behavior that includes interest development, choice-making/decision-making, and performance and persistence (Inda et al., 2013; Lent & Brown, 2013; Lent et al., 2006; Leung, 2008; Lim, Lent, & Penn, 2016; Scheuermann et al., 2014). SCT refers to the interconnectedness of personal cognition or motivation, behavior, and one's environment (Albert & Luzzo, 1999; Lent et al., 1994) to explain the capabilities of individuals and accomplishments (Bandura, 2007). The intent of SCCT, as an extension of SCT, was to address content and process facets, or the what and how, of career development and

behaviors across one's life span (Lent & Brown, 2013; Lim et al., 2016). The content facets refer to questions pertaining to what occupation, vocation, or career would an individual gravitate or prefer to engage, as well as found or experienced satisfaction/wellbeing and success in that choice (Lent & Brown, 2013; Lim et al., 2016). The processes facets refer to how individuals elected or decided upon their career strategies and adapted to the realities of change and challenges in the pursuit of a career (Lent & Brown, 2013; Lim et al., 2016). The interconnectedness of content and process facets help to construct an individual's ability to adapt, self-regulate, and form career decisions, whether effective or ineffective (Lent & Brown, 2013). By understanding the context and process by which African American women make career decisions using an SCCT lens, a better awareness of how to improve the diversity within the upper echelon of an organization may occur.

### **Diversity as a Management Issue**

Workforce diversity, specifically in senior-level positions, is a means to increase organizational innovation, financial success, and organizational capabilities towards sustaining a competitive advantage and keeping their promise of corporate social responsibility (Galinsky et al., 2015; Harjoto et al., 2015; Johns, 2013). There are elements of diversity that must be described in this study to put the issue of underrepresentation and importance of diversity into context. These elements include the evolution of diversity, regulatory remedies towards diversity, diversity from an organizational perspective, societal and workplace impact and diversity, organizational approach to diversity, and effective management of diversity.

## **Evolution of Diversity**

To understand the current state of diversity, one must understand its history. The history of race and gender relations in the U.S. shaped the political, social, cultural, and economic environment and ideology within the United States (Pérez Huber & Solorzano, 2015). This historical ideological perspective manifested in behavior reflecting the thought of superiority over non-European/White groups (Nkomo & Hoobler, 2014; Pérez Huber & Solorzano, 2015). One prevalent group, throughout American history, who remains viewed as unsuitable, unqualified, or untrustworthy are African Americans by those with such an ideology or have underlying tendencies towards this ideology (DeCuir-Gunby & Gunby 2016). This superiority ideology, with respect to African Americans specifically, carried over into the workplace and created an environment of workplace discrimination (which still exists today) resulting in stereotypical views, beliefs, and practices and exclusion of access to knowledge regarding career advancement to senior-level and knowledgeable cohorts, who could assist with the navigation of the workplace political system (Angel et al., 2013; DeCuir-Gunby, & Gunby 2016; Johns, 2013).

There were many points in history that impacted the African American worker and the HR strategy. World War II marked a period in history that heightened the need for production workers and required HR to formulate a strategy to create an environment of diversity for the inclusion of African Americans in the workforce (Nkomo & Hoobler, 2014). How to manage this new group of workers, while being cognizant of the European/White male racial ideology, was the focus of this HR strategy and would be a

model for future diversity strategies (Delton, 2007; Nkomo & Hoobler, 2014). This model consisted of creating a position and employing African Americans to oversee this new group of workers, as well as provide the necessary education and training for both groups of new African American workers (Delton, 2007). Although this new group of workers was the start of organizational diversity, there still existed the racial ideology of negativity that would later ignite racial tensions and mark the 1960's as the start of the Civil Rights Movements, as well as the institution of several legal remedies towards equality and diversity (Lindsey et al., 2013; Nkomo & Hoobler, 2014). Regarding this new model, this may have also been the start of professional or career segregation, which was when African Americans were steered towards a specific career path versus having a career of choice (Cook & Glass, 2013). Even in today's organizations and possibly ingrained as an ideology, there tends to be a heavy presence of African Americans in the urban or community development or diversity and inclusion type departments and careers (Cook & Glass, 2013) versus science, technology, engineering, arts, and mathematics (STEAM) careers.

### **Regulatory Remedies Towards Diversity**

Many laws were created to improve employment for disparate groups, particularly African American women, as the result of civil and legal movements within the United States (Lindsey et al., 2013; Nkomo & Hoobler, 2014). For example, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was one of the federal regulations to provide African American women an equal chance at a career of their choosing (Cortina et al., 2013; Graham et al., 2016; Qin et al., 2013), as the act prohibits employment discrimination based on race, gender, national

origin, and religion. Although there were many laws to circumvent employment discrimination, inadequacies in such laws required the implementation of other laws, such as the Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) Act of 1972 and Affirmative Action, to regulate diversity within organizations and particularly in positions of leadership, which HR had responsibility (Graham et al., 2016; Harjoto et al., 2015; Nkomo, & Hoobler, 2014). For example, the EEO Act included protection from not just intentional discrimination but unintentional discrimination as well, which strengthened the intent of the Civil Rights Act and other regulations prohibiting employment discrimination (Nkomo & Hoobler, 2014).

Additional regulations went into effect in recognition of underrepresentation in senior-level position, such as the Glass Ceiling Act of 1991 and Dodd-Frank Act of 2010. The Glass Ceiling Act was created due to role and compensation disparities of women versus men in higher-level organizational positions resulting from perceived barriers (Johns, 2013). In the financial industry, there are also regulations that must be complied. For example, Section 342 of the Dodd-Frank Wall Street Reform and Consumer Protection Agency Act of 2010 (Dodd-Frank Act) is a mandate on any regulated entities to strengthen their diversity and inclusion policies and practices in management, employment, and business activities (Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System, 2015). Through this regulation, banks must report their diversity policies and practices and diversity records of employees to federal agencies as directed, such as the Federal Reserve System (FRS) or Securities Exchange Commission (SEC). Similar to the Glass Ceiling Act, there is difficulty with both acts in the reporting function as there is a lack of

consistency in aggregating the data related specifically to employment of females and minorities to accurately depict the diversity schema of organizations (Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System, 2015; Johns, 2013).

Although these and other regulations were for the benefit of prohibiting discrimination and promoting diversity, there is a sense of fatigue regarding multiculturalism, equality, and affirmative action within the workplace (Cortina et al., 2013; Malveaux, 2013; Nkomo & Hoobler, 2014). This fatigue was particularly evident with the election of President Obama. For example, some individuals saw his election to the highest role in the United States as a country cured of its past discriminatory practices and indiscretions and no longer needing rules to address discrimination (Cortina et al., 2013; Malveaux, 2013). Regardless of the implementation of various laws and regulations regarding diversity in the workplace and election President Obama, recent data still depicts the continuous lack of workplace diversity in senior-level positions. For example, 2015 marked .2% of African American women were in a CEO role and 1.2% in an executive or senior-level role within a 500 S&P organization (Catalyst, 2015).

### **Diversity and Issues from an Organizational Perspective**

A successful diversity strategy can greatly benefit an organization. From an organizational perspective, diversity is also about creating a heterogeneous environment, which is a driver for greater quality, levels of creativity, innovation, decision-making, and financial progression (Galinsky et al., 2015; Mahadeo et al., 2012; Qin et al., 2013). Galinsky et al. indicated that when diversity exists in senior leadership of an organization, the more likely these individuals would conduct better decision-making



towards the policies, procedures and practices to improve the diversity of the organizational culture, talent pipeline, and candidates and recruitment for senior leadership. The assumption would be that without diversity, organizations would likely decrease their opportunity to recruit and retain potential top talent and ability to gain or sustain their competitive advantage. Because most senior-level decision-making positions (e.g. CEO and other executive suite roles) in large organizations are homogeneous (European/White and male), there exists the issue of underrepresentation of disparate groups or lack of diversity, specifically of African American women in senior-level positions (Fitzsimmons, Callan, & Paulsen, 2014; Mahadeo et al., 2012). Although the issue of underrepresentation could be explained by research regarding the challenges and barriers experienced, this study digs deeper to uncover the how and why African American women were able to achieve senior-level positions. There is an importance in acknowledging those challenges as the candidates of the study discussed during the interviews, but those successes must also be noted.

African American women experience enablers and barriers to success in both the public and private sectors. As identified through studies, such as from the EEOC (2013) and others (Angel et al., 2013; Byrd, 2014; Debebe et al., 2016; Johns, 2013; Kameny et al., 2013; Ratcliff, Vescio, & Dahl, 2015), there were several issues that perpetuated the underrepresentation in senior-level positions within an organization. These issues included caregiver obligations not recognized via organizational policies, lack of leader support to perpetuate equal opportunity to advance, type of position or career bias, pay inequality, and lack of support at the organizational level.

**Caregiving.** Debebe, Bilimoria, and Anderson (2016) expressed that without a change to organizational policies and procedures, such as work-life balance initiatives, women's leadership development programs would fail to create equity within senior-level roles for women. Whether caring for children, elderly parents, or other family members, women have traditionally been the caregiver of the family unit. Governmental and organizational policies have yet to keep pace with family obligations to provide women with the flexibility to choose a career or higher career level (Johns, 2013). For example, the enactment of the Family Medical Leave Act (FMLA) took place in 1993, and only recently has there been an acknowledgement of same-sex marriage to change the definition of spouse (U.S. Department of Labor, n.d.).

**Lack of leader and organizational support.** Although the lack of African American representation at the top tier of an organization limits opportunities for sponsorship, the most evident support from a leader takes the form as a mentor (Beckwith et al., 2016; Johns, 2013). There can be an unwillingness of some leaders to become mentors and provide guidance to African American women (Beckwith et al., 2016). This guidance would include how to navigate the political system of the organization, develop the most advantageous networking systems, and determine the appropriate path towards a senior-level position (Angel et al., 2013; Beckwith et al., 2016; EEOC, n.d.; Johns, 2013). One point made by Johns (2013) as a reason behind the lack of leader support is the potential for the relationship between a male mentor and female mentee to be misunderstood as something more than a mentorship relationship. Whether mentorship or other form of program as a mechanism of support, organizational and HR leaders failed

to consider African Americans holistically to construct programs and training conducive to providing support and opportunities for career advancement (Byrd, 2014; Debebe et al., 2016). In addition to the lack of sponsorship from leadership, organizational environment could also be a contributing factor in the lack of support.

When considering the organizational environment and the lack of leader or organizational support, the topic of the glass ceiling effect must also be included, as well as self-imposed barriers. Patton and Haynes (2014) described the glass ceiling as the lack of women and minorities in the promotional pipeline versus issues in the hiring. This lack could be contributed to various reasons. For example, leader bias could play a role in the hiring (and promotional) process. Boone, Veller, Nikolaeva, Keith, Kefgen, and Houran (2013) described self-imposed barriers (e.g. family and work-life balance) versus the glass ceiling as a barrier for women. Other self-imposed barriers could include women who seek leadership roles but are closed to the need to engage in transformational learning (Debebe et al., 2016). For example, each leader differs in how their leadership style manifests and must make certain concessions when the type of acceptable leadership is culturally driven, thus, creating an issue when not willing to concede to that change in style. Depending upon the organizational culture, the lack of diversity in senior-level position may be more complicated than a lack of mentorship or self-imposed reasons.

**Gender and racial bias.** The concept of diversity is not as simple as black and white. There is a level of complexity that is the result of historical events and experiences (Bond & Haynes, 2014; Davis & Maldonado, 2015). Historical events made a lasting

impression upon society, the workplace, and generations of African American women (Bond & Haynes, 2014; Brown & Segrist, 2016; Byrd, 2014; Rosette & Livingston, 2012). One impression upon society and the workplace is the characterization of leadership and who should be in that role.

There are certain perceptions of African American women that may hinder their ability to gain a senior-level position. These perceptions include the inability of this group to perform the role as a function of being a woman, where society deem men to have leader characteristics, and African American, where some have the ideology of this group being lazy and unmotivated (Angel et al., 2013; EEOC, n.d.; Johns, 2013; Kameny et al., 2013; Ratcliff et al., 2015). With the number of degrees and experiences ascribed to African American women, who function at a high level, a lack of preparedness for a senior-level position is hardly a fair assessment of their ability to perform the job (Angel et al., 2013; BLS, 2015).

Society has historically determined that the qualities of a leader or someone in a senior-level position is traditionally someone that is European/White and male. From a workplace perspective, societal norms of what a leader looks and behaves like (traditionally European/White and male) may impact an organization's recruitment and outreach practices, which impacts the number of African-American women in the talent pool and minimizes the number of African American women in senior-level positions (Davis & Maldonado, 2015; John, 2013). Leadership development programs within organizations must include and organizational and HR leaders must promote an ideological structure of diversity and inclusion (Johns, 2013). There could also be

instances of bias that is unconscious, where White/European males in senior-level positions continue to advance or mentor like candidates as traditionally perpetrated without thought for diversity (EEOC, n.d.; Johns, 2013).

From an African American group perspective, this characterization of leadership contributed to conflicting messages from the time of birth to adulthood. At an early age, African-American girls learn at home or school that they can become anything in terms of their role in the world (or workforce), such as a senior-level leader, which increases their level of self-efficacy beliefs (Lent & Brown, 2013; Watts, Frame, Moffett, Van Hein, & Hein, 2015). As time progresses to adulthood and they experience differences in how they are treated in society and the workforce versus other racial and gendered groups, their perception changes about their self-efficacy, particularly when underrepresentation in certain roles or careers is evident (Rosette & Livingston, 2012; Watts et al., 2015). This history of societal and workplace norms may have an impact on behavior, such as decision-making strategies regarding submission for employment in an organization, pursuit of a senior-level position, or election to retain employment. To counter the negative impact of history on a disparate group, the federal government established laws at an attempt to mandate organizations and provide equal opportunities for African American women (Graham et al., 2016; Nkomo, & Hoobler, 2014).

### **Organizational and HR Approach to Diversity**

Organizational and HR leaders are responsible for a multitude of elements within an organization. These responsibilities include identifying areas within the organization that require future key talent, anticipating future skills necessary for future key positions,

taking time to carefully select high potential candidates, and facilitating focused development of those candidates (Kowalewski, Moretti, & McGee, 2011). They must also consider how best to put forth a plan that aligns with organizational goals and future direction of the organization (Kowalewski et al., 2011). Human Resource Management (HRM) is a system of policies and practices that impact and influence employee (human capital resources) and organizational behaviors toward achieving sustainability and a competitive advantage (Alfes, Shantz, Truss, & Soane, 2013; Boon, Belschak, Den Hartog & Pijnenburg, 2014; Nyberg, Moliterno, Hale, & Lepak, 2014). The outcome of these policies and practices can have a positive (or negative) impact on employees, the organization, or the environment (Triana et al., 2015; Voegtlin & Greenwood, 2016).

One of the current contributions of HRM research is looking at the policies and practices of an organization from the employees' perspective (bottom-up approach) for decision-making versus depending on the traditional views of leadership (top-down approach) to wholly dictate HRM policy (Nyberg et al., 2014). There is still work to be done in HRM. Organizational and HR leaders must realize that all policies and practices are not a one-size-fits-all solution, event, or activity. They should view a woman holistically (gender, race, age, etc.) in the design and implementation of policies and programs to be organizationally successful (Byrd, 2014; Debebe et al., 2016). For example, the implementation of a program geared towards the advancement of women, such as women's leadership development program, traditionally focuses specifically on the female aspect of the individual at the exclusion of the entire identity of that female (Byrd, 2014; Debebe et al., 2016). When organizational and HR leaders fail to account

for a person's entire being, how then can they effectively manage the diversity of the organization (Galinsky et al., 2016; Harjoto et al., 2015; Spurk & Abele, 2014)? There are organizations that miss that point about the implementation of diversity initiatives.

### **Effective Management of Diversity**

Organizational and HR leaders play a role in countering the negative impact of societal and workplace history through the transformation of thought (paradigm shift) and changes to policies, practices, and programs, such as recruitment, diversity and inclusion, talent management, retention, and succession planning strategies (Holder et al., 2015; Nachmias & Walmsley, 2015; Nkomo & Hoobler, 2014). Galinsky et al. (2016) expressed that diversity alone did not produce creativity and innovation, but the success of diversity was dependent upon the effectiveness of managing a diverse population. Although an organization may have diversity policies and trained its workforce on concepts and expectations of its employees towards diversity, a manager's behavior is still voluntary as no regulations exist to dictate how a manager is to manage its diverse population (Kulik, 2014; Nkomo & Hoobler, 2014), thus, a manager may feel no obligation to change any negative ideology about race and diversity. As such, the manager may feel no obligation to ensure that their direct reports receive the training necessary to meet the commitment of the organization towards diversity and inclusion (Kulik, 2014). This concept of a negative ideology is not unique to mid- or lower-level managers and supervisors.

Those in senior-level positions also have an impact on the culture of an organization in terms of diversity. If the senior leaders of an organization view diversity

in senior-level positions, for example, as inconsequential as they consider the achievement of the company's (financial, regulatory, and other) goals or misunderstand the concept of diversity (Berrey, 2013; Mahadeo et al., 2012), there is the potential for inadequacies in an organization's recruitment, talent management, retention, and succession planning strategies. Similarly, senior leaders may deem diversity as means to rationalize stereotyping African American women to support their racial (and gender) ideology of this group as lacking the knowledge, skills, and aptitude to advance to a senior-level position (Delton, 2007; Nkomo & Hoobler, 2014; Noon, 2007). Though there may be nobility in having a color-blind stance in managing people, a manager may miss the opportunity to be cognizant of the diversity (similarities and differences) between groups to fully understand how to manage a diverse population (Galinsky et al., 2016; Mahadeo et al., 2012; Offermann et al., 2014). In other words, without understanding the perspectives of African American women, particularly those at the senior-level, there is a missed opportunity for organizational and HR leaders to continuously improve their commitment towards increased diversity in senior-level positions (Galinsky et al., 2016; Harjoto et al., 2015; Triana et al., 2015). This brings the discussion of diversity and a new path for organizational and HR leaders to elevate their recruitment, retention, talent management, diversity and inclusion policies and programs, and succession planning strategies with an African American woman focus.

### **New Path to Explore Regarding Diversity**

Though there are many researchers who examined and explored the lack of diversity in senior-level positions, there still exists a lack of diversity in senior-level



positions within organizations (Fouad & Santana, 2017). Bond and Haynes (2014) expressed the importance of exploring workplace diversity from several combinations and factors in relation to other factors. Davis and Maldonado (2015) stated that there has not been enough research regarding African American women and their leadership development experiences. Nachmias and Walmsley (2015) stated that the typical review of decision-making was from a quantitative perspective, thus, emphasizing the need to perform a qualitative study. Perhaps the time has come to explore a different path and focus on how African American women make career decisions. Understanding the process by which individuals, specifically African American women, make career decisions could present an opportunity for organizational and HR leaders to reflect on and reconsider the effectiveness of their policies, programs, and strategies on recruitment, talent management, diversity and inclusion policies and programs, and succession planning (Nachmias & Walmsley, 2015). Career decision-making is a critical process for how individuals choose to progress their careers and the consequential results (good or bad) that prompt other decision-making. The results of this study may be key to breaking the cycle of African American women underrepresentation in senior-level positions by providing organizational and HR leaders with the information to support a new path for enhancing an organizations' opportunity to project an effective policy of corporate social responsibility (Harjoto et al., 2015). Workplace diversity is an important topic in the field of management and exploring new ways to expand the mindset of those responsible for workplace diversity is what I hope to achieve by understanding the experiences of African American women towards career decision-making strategies.

### **Literature on SCCT**

SCCT has a level of complexity in linkage to other theories and history that is important to describe. Albert Bandura is widely credited with the formation of social learning theory (SLT) and social cognitive theory (SCT). SLT posits that individuals learn how to act or model behavior of others as a condition of observation (Bandura, 1978). In 1986, Bandura modified the naming of SLT to SCT in recognition of the importance of self-efficacy and the cognitive application of human behavior (Bandura, 1986/2007). SCT refers to the interconnectedness of personal cognition or motivation, behavior, and one's environment (Albert & Luzzo, 1999; Lent et al., 1994) to explain the capabilities of individuals and accomplishments (Bandura, 2007). Hackett and Betz (1981) began the path of examining career development, self-efficacy, and career choice, specifically with regards to women, but the establishment of SCCT came to fruition when Hackett formed a partnership with Lent and Brown (Betz & Hackett, 2006; Fouad & Santana, 2017). Lent, Brown, and Hackett framed SCCT in 1994 as an overarching theory regarding career development and behavior throughout an individual's lifespan (Fouad & Santana, 2017; Lent et al., 2006). The primary aim of SCCT was to address the content and process facets, or the what and how, of career development and behaviors across an individual's life span (Lent & Brown, 2013; Lim et al., 2016). The rationale for the development of SCCT was to unify established theories pertaining to career development (Lent et al., 2006) and expand upon Bandura's (1986) social cognitive theory (SCT). Chartrand and Rose (1996) and Pfeifer, Šarlija, and Zekić Sušac (2016) expressed other linkages to SCCT as a career theory that fits under the umbrella of

motivational theories. These linkages and history were instrumental in the development of SCCT.

The factors, or cognitive-person variables, of SCCT are closely related to career decision-making strategies and play a part in how individuals self-regulate their career choice behavior, which include self-efficacy beliefs, outcome expectations, and personal goals (Inda et al., 2013; Lent & Brown, 2013; Lent et al., 2006). This regulation of behavior also pertains to the level or extent to which an individual has a choice, which can create a conflict in an individual's perception of how to make the appropriate or right choice regarding one's career that can then impact one's motivation towards that choice (Buse, Bilimoria, & Perelli, 2013; Duffy et al., 2013). Because one's motivation, behavior, and environment (e.g. political, social, cultural, and economic environments) have the potential to change, whether on a limited basis or consistently, SCCT is appropriate for this study as this lens accounts for the impact of these changes in one's self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and personal goals (Buse et al., 2013; Pfeifer et al., 2016). The purpose of this section was to describe the complexity of each SCCT factor.

### **Self-Efficacy**

Self-efficacy is a central component or foundation of what feeds into SCCT. This factor of SCCT is foundational because the term refers to the belief in one's ability towards performing a particular act or task (Lent & Brown, 2013). A more holistic view of this component is to identify as perceived self-efficacy. Perceived self-efficacy refers to one's belief (or perception) in one's ability to affect expected outcomes based on the actions or behaviors by the individual (Bandura, 2003; Lent & Brown, 2013; Lent et al.,

2006). The basis for this belief relates to an individual's self-appraisal of recent past performance, knowledge, or experience that then impacts how and why an individual makes career decisions throughout an individual's lifespan (Garcia et al., 2015; Nachmias & Walmsley, 2015; Saaty, 2008; Spurk & Abele, 2014). This recent past performance, knowledge, and experience are extensions of one's motivation, behavior, and environment, which results in the level of self-efficacy being a direct input of one's decision-making strategy (Bandura, 2003; Duffy et al., 2013; Lent et al., 2006).

There is also a thought that self-efficacy is also dependent upon the cycle of success. A determination of success comes in the form either at an objective or subjective level. Objective refers to those external rewards or recognitions that an individual may receive, such as a promotion or better than average increase in salary (Abele & Spurk, 2009). Subjective refers to those internalized factors that an individual incurs upon self, such as personal satisfaction of career or accomplishment (Abele & Spurk, 2009). When an individual experiences success at an objective level, the individual is more likely to identify success as being at the subjective level, which may increase the level of self-efficacy (Abele & Spurk, 2009; Spurk & Abele, 2014). With experience comes the potential to determine level of success, which has an impact on self-efficacy that directly impacts one's career decision-making strategy.

From a social and cultural environment perspective, there are certain contextual aspects that may impact one's self-efficacy. Buse et al. (2013), as well as Fouad and Santana (2017), indicated that gender (e.g. woman) could play a role in an individual's experience and, thus, become the precursor to the decision-making strategy of pursuing a

male dominated role, as in a senior-level position, for example. Similarly, one could rationalize the same when considering gender and race (e.g. African American woman).

A high level of self-efficacy for African American women could be key towards having the persistence and determination to achieve a senior-level position. An individual's ability to cope with any challenges or difficulties is dependent upon one's strength of self-efficacy, which enables an individual to thrive due to a sense of determination (Betz & Hackett, 2006; Duffy et al., 2013; Fouad & Santana, 2017). In other words, when an African American woman has a high-level of self-efficacy, she is more likely to express persistence through career obstacles to achieve her career goal, such as a senior-level position, than circumvent the obstacle (Betz & Hackett, 2006; Fouad & Santana, 2017). There is also the probability of an African American woman not identifying an obstacle as an actual challenge or threat, when she perceives her ability to overcome the obstacle as absolute (Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 2000). When an African American woman feels apprehensive about situation, e.g. gender or racial bias, there could be the probability of self-efficacy depletion for her (Betz & Hackett, 2006). With a level of self-efficacy established, whether high or low, the next stage as a humanistic tendency is to then envision the probability of success because of a potential action or behavior (Bandura, 1989/2003). When an individual can envision the possibility, they can then decide which action to take.

Self-efficacy, as the foundation of SCCT, is a critical input of an individual's decision-making strategy and, thus, resulting behavior. A high-level of self-efficacy is particularly critical for African American women who excel to move upward within a

European/White male dominated organization (Beckwith et al., 2016). As such, one must consider the processes and elements involved. Bandura (1989) described a series of self-efficacy processes, which included cognitive, motivational, affective, and selection. Sub-components, as highlighted in articles by both Bandura (1989) and Albert and Luzzo (1999), of informational elements of self-efficacy included performance accomplishments, vicarious learning and experiences, verbal or social persuasion, and physiological and emotional provocation (Bandura, 1989; Albert & Luzzo, 1999; Lent et al., 2006).

**Cognitive.** *Cognitive* refers to one's ability to synthesize information about the environment to predict or visualize the likelihood of success that then influence behavior or actions resulting in experiences to learn from (Bandura, 2007). By remembering past successes and failures and learning from the positive and negative consequences of those experiences, individuals put forth thought to predict future performance successes to then decide on what action to take toward their career advancement (Bandura, 1989; Lent et al., 2016). To master an effective thought process or ability to accurately predict means that individuals must be cognizant of their abilities and probability of success through quality experiences (Bandura, 1989/2003; Lent & Brown, 2013; Lent et al., 2016).

African American women must have a higher level of consciousness than their counterparts. When individuals have an awareness of self and have accurate information about a specific career and path, they are more motivated than those who are less aware to strategically determine the appropriate approach to and mature their understanding of their career decision-making process (Harlow & Bowman, 2016; Lent et al., 2016).

McNeely Cobham and Patton (2015) indicated that African American women, specifically, must be cognizant of expectations placed on them by organizational leaders because of their duality status as those expectations tend to be higher than the expectations placed on their counterparts, who have a single group social identity (e.g. White/European or male). Because organizational leaders may view an African American woman employee as ‘other’ or ‘not being part of the in-group’, they lose the opportunity to benefit from a unique perspective about the organizational culture and strategies toward achieving organizational sustainability and competitive advantage (Beckwith et al., 2016). Being cognizant of self, expectations, and any ensuing experiences because of leader expectations could complicate the decision-making process of African American women (Beckwith et al., 2016), which exemplifies the importance of African American women having high self-efficacy.

**Motivation.** *Motivation* refers to internal (e.g. self-efficacy) or external (e.g. monetary rewards) influence that affects one’s behavior or actions (Bandura, 2007; Hirschi et al., 2013). An individual’s level of motivation towards a scenario depends upon the thought process in predicting the level of success (Bandura, 1989; Lent et al., 2016). The impact of an obstacle (e.g. salary inequities, race and gender bias, or denial of promotions) that lasts for an extended period of time or a series of continuous obstacles could decrease the level of motivation of an individual over time (Bandura, 1989). Additionally, the extent to which a career or career level (e.g. senior-level position) is attractive to an individual, based on past performance or knowledge or perception of the environment, will determine the level of motivation in deciding the type of pursuit of a

career or career level or whether to pursue at all (Bandura, 1989; Hoobler, Lemmon, & Wayne, 2011; Lent, 2013). For example, if an organization has a bad reputation in their hiring or promotional practices of African American women, the motivation level to apply for a job or higher-level position at that organization may be low for this group. Motivation could be similarly low for this group when the expectations by organizational leaders are too high as compared to that of their counterparts and perceived as unjust or discriminating (Beckwith, et al., 2016). To the detriment of the organization, there is the potential loss of benefiting from the talent of women and minorities due to the perception of the environment (Hoobler et al., 2011). With diversity management as one type of approach to fulfilling the future talent needs of the organization, as well to enhance employees' perception of the organization's level of commitment to the employee (Qin et al., 2013), this example illustrates the importance of organization and HR leaders to revisit their talent strategies and adjust where applicable.

**Affective.** *Affect* refers to an emotional response or reaction to the environment that can impact or influence one's actions or behavior (Hirschi et al., 2013). Emotions are human characteristics that can influence an individual's thought process and manifest in either a positive or negative way. Most prominent is one's ability to cope in times of adversity, which includes any challenges or barriers towards career advancement. When an individual experiences adversity, an individual's ability to cope or self-regulate determines whether the individual engages in fight or flight behavior. In other words, an individual's coping efficacy impacts the decision-making process that results in behavior to either persevere or avoid adversarial situations and may impact an individual's



physiological state (Albert & Luzzo, 1999; Bandura 1989). The affective process of self-efficacy is of importance, particularly when talking about the career self-management (CSM) model of SCCT that addresses those adaptive behaviors toward career decision-making (Lent et al., 2016).

There could be some apprehension in selecting a career or career path. Similar to first generation college students feeling of apprehension prior to attending college, so might African American women about pursuing a senior-level position that would be representative of the first in the organization's history (Harlow & Bowman, 2016). A feeling of fear or trepidation could negatively impact an individual's motivation to pursue a senior-level position, thus, decreasing the probability to select such a position or career path. On the other hand, an awareness of self and capability could be enough to overcome this apprehension.

**Selection.** *Selection* is “the act (or process) of choosing something” (Merriam-Webster, 2017). Whether selection is of a career path or environment in which to foster a career, individuals base their selection on perceived self-efficacy beliefs and, at times, personal persuasion about perceived capabilities (Bandura, 1989). These capabilities would include the ability to cope in adverse conditions or where there is a deficiency in one's level of personal control. By processing information about the strength of their capabilities, individuals make career decisions whether advantageous, to their detriment, or as a matter of avoidance (Bandura, 1989). For example, if a freshman salesperson receives a negatively rated performance review regarding his ability to meet sales goals, his level of motivation may decrease and influence his decision as to whether to remain

in a sales career or at that organization. If a freshman salesperson receives an outstandingly rated performance review regarding his ability to meet sales goals, his level of motivation may increase and influence his decision to pursue a senior-level sales position or managerial opportunity in sales.

### **Outcome Expectations**

What an individual expects as an outcome can impact career decision-making strategies. Outcome expectations refer to the beliefs one has about the consequences (good or bad) of performing an act or task (Lent & Brown, 2013). In other words, this factor of SCCT is about what an individual may imagine or envision as the result(s) or consequence(s) for engaging in a particular behavior or taking a particular action (Bandura, 1989, Lent et al., 2006). The results or consequences could be either positive or negative, depending on the perception of an individual, group, or society. For those individuals with high self-efficacy, they are more likely to imagine a scenario in terms of a positive outcome versus individuals with low self-efficacy being more likely to imagine a scenario in terms of a negative outcome (Albert & Luzzo, 1999; Bandura, 2003; Lent, 2013). A positive expected outcome may highly motivate an individual to pursue a higher-level position within an organization versus if the outcome expectation was negative, thus, resulting in low motivation to pursue.

There is a complication with envisioning or predicting a career outcome. This complication relates to the continuous changes within the work environment and societal norms (Lent, 2013; Lent, Ezeofor, Morrison, Penn, & Ireland, 2016), particularly for women and minorities. Individuals at an early age become predisposed to societal or

cultural norms pertaining to gender and race and careers and positions within an organization and could transfer the psychological and social impacts of this predisposition onto envisioning the outcome of pursuing a senior-level position (Buse et al., 2013). One could also consider that what an individual may envision may or may not be reasonable, which is dependent upon whether the individual's self-efficacy (one's belief in ability) is flawed or misguided. Through having or building a high-level of self-efficacy, an individual can overcome any negativity or misinformation about achieving a senior-level position within an organization and envision a positive outcome to then establish personal goals towards that pursuit.

### **Personal Goals**

When referring to an individual's goals, there is a distinction to be made. Personal goals refer to the intent of an individual to either pursue a career or career level (choice goal) or achieve a level of accomplishment (performance goal) based on perceived self-efficacy and outcome expectations (Albert & Luzzo, 1999; Lent et al., 2006). Self-efficacy and outcome expectations are precursors to an individual forging intent to pursue a career or career level, e.g. senior-level position within an organization, which then evolves into decision-making as to what and how to pursue (Lent et al., 2016). When considering the CSM model of SCCT, goals refer to an individual's intent to exhibit behavior to adapt to or cope with any career activities (Lent et al., 2016). Personal goals are also directional and provides a sense of structure to guide behavior to achieve a desired or visualized expectation (Bocanegra, Gubi, & Cappaert, 2016). By establishing personal goals, an individual may become motivated to meet the challenges of pursuing a

senior-level position, for example, envision the probability of achieving those goals, and then making the decision to take steps towards achieving those goals.

### **Decision-Making Process**

Career decision-making is an involved process. The process by which individuals ensure that their decisions are sound or logical include clarification of the problem or knowledge to pursue, determination of the goal to obtain and what options are available, comparison and weighting of options in light of the goal, and selection of the best option with the remaining options as backup plans (Saaty, 2008). Retrieval of knowledge or experience, based on beliefs, values, or understanding of the problem, or collection of information helps to facilitate the decision-making process (Nachmias & Walmsley, 2015; Saaty, 2008). From a career perspective, past performance and experience have an impact on the individual's level of career optimism which then impacts how and why an individual makes career decisions throughout an individual's lifespan (Garcia et al., 2015). In other words, based on past performance and experiences, an individual reconciles those experiences to formulate a career decision-making process that impacts their career path, such as whether to pursue a higher-level position and what actions to take (Watts et al., 2015). As part of formulating career decision-making, individuals must consider their level of self-efficacy beliefs, outcome expectations, and personal goals towards successful achievement of a senior-level position (Johns, 2013; Lent & Brown, 2013). For example, there is a greater likelihood that women will pursue an elite leadership position when they perceive self-efficacy and expectation outcome to be high (Yeagley et al., 2010). Perceived barriers, whether intrinsic (internal or psychological

factors) or extrinsic (external or working environment, practices, politics, societal perception/messaging, etc.), could impact an individual's interest or decision to pursue a senior-level position (Allen, French, & Poteet, 2016; Lent & Brown, 2013; Nachmias & Walmsley, 2015; Yeagley et al., 2010). For example, an individual's self-efficacy beliefs, expectations, and goals may decrease enough to decide not to pursue a senior-level role or belabor the point resulting in indecision or indecisiveness (Chang & Edwards, 2015; Inda et al., 2013; Jiang, 2014; Nachmias & Walmsley, 2015; Yeagley et al., 2010).

### **Summary and Conclusions**

The elements of Chapter 2, the Literature Review, consisted of the literature strategy, conceptual framework, and review of literature. To introduce this chapter, I restated the problem and purpose and literature illustrating the relevance of the problem. The first section focused on the strategy for finding relevant literature, inclusive of keywords (e.g. social cognitive career theory and underrepresentation of African American women) and databases (e.g. Business Source Complete and ProQuest Central) listings. The section of conceptual framework presented social cognitive theory (SCCT) as a three-pronged model regarding career development and behavior that included interest development, choice-making/decision-making, and performance and persistence. The remaining sections covered the literature on diversity (from various perspectives including challenges and barriers), SCCT (cognitive-person variables (e.g. self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and personal goals) that impact the decision-making process and the decision-making process. An indication of where there was a gap in the literature included the lack of diversity pertaining to African American women with Duffy et al.

(2013) suggestion of additional research with a social cognitive career theory (SCCT) lens on a population in the workforce and Inda et al. (2013) recommendation from a decision-making perspective with a qualitative approach, as most studies were quantitative.

With Chapter 1 (Introduction) and Chapter 2 (Literature Review) as the foundation of this study, the next chapter provides the details of how I formulated and performed the field research for this qualitative phenomenological study. In Chapter 3, I describe the blueprint for how I planned to uncover the career decision-making strategies of African American women for this study. These details included the design of the study, details of the selected participant pool, and the process for interviewing the participants.

## Chapter 3: Research Method

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to understand the lived experiences regarding career advancement decision-making strategies for senior-level African American women. This chapter is a description of the research method for this study, which includes the research design and rationale, role of the researcher, methodology, and issues of trustworthiness. The section on the research design and rationale consists of the research questions as listed in Chapter 1, the central concept and phenomenon of the study, the research tradition adopted for this study, and the rationale for selecting the tradition. The section on the role of the researcher consists of an explanation of my role in the study, any personal and professional relationships that I had with the participants, any biases that I had and how those biases were managed, and identification of any other ethical issues and how I planned to manage those issues. The methodology section consists of an in-depth description of the participant selection process, the instrumentation for collecting data and protocols to ensure content validity, and the data analysis plan. The issues of trustworthiness section describes the process of controlling for rigor and the ethical procedures for managing participants and data. Through this chapter, future researchers may be able to replicate my study to explore different populations, industries, or other factors.

### **Research Design and Rationale**

A researcher must consider what research design would answer the research questions effectively. When researchers desire to uncover or explore why and how

something exists or takes place, with results illustrated in a detailed, descriptive, or textual form, the appropriate research design is qualitative, as opposed to quantitative or mixed methods studies. A qualitative inquiry is particularly useful and powerful when examples of the phenomenon are few (Patton, 2015). As the purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of a population (African American women in senior-level positions) regarding their decision-making strategies towards career advancement using an SCCT lens, the research design selected was a qualitative phenomenological study. This section describes the qualitative design and reiterates the research questions for this study.

### **Phenomenology**

Understanding the lived experiences of African American women is key to bringing about social change within many organizations. A phenomenological qualitative design can provide an opportunity for a researcher to gain in-depth insight into the lived experiences of participants regarding a specific phenomenon (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2007; Miles et al., 2014). The German philosopher Edmund H. Husserl introduced phenomenology, which refers to understanding how humans understand their experiences to form a worldview about a phenomenon (Giorgi, 2012; Patton, 2015). Giorgi (2012) described phenomenology as a research design that seeks “to understand how phenomena present themselves to consciousness and the elucidation of this process is a descriptive task” (p. 6). Patton (2015) expressed phenomenology in terms of gaining the essence of meaning or phenomena based on experiences, sensory in nature, and requires description, clarification, and interpretation. Miles et al. (2014) indicated that phenomenology



typically constructs data into themes to ascertain the crux of meaning about phenomena by way of research participants. In other words, a phenomenological inquiry is an opportunity to listen to the lived experiences of the participants in detail, gain in-depth insight into the perceptions, beliefs, and assumptions of their worldview about the phenomenon, and then accurately interpret meaning in relation to the phenomenon (Patton, 2015; Reiter, Stewart, & Bruce, 2011).

### **Research Questions**

The research questions for this study aligned with the purpose of this study. With the purpose of the study in mind, the focus for this study were decision-making and the conceptual framework of SCCT in terms of career advancement towards senior-level positions. As such, the two research questions for this study were:

*RQ1:* What decisions-making strategies do African American women use to attain senior-level management positions?

*RQ2:* How have facets of social cognitive career theory (SCCT) (e.g. self-efficacy beliefs, outcome expectations, and personal goals) impacted the decision-making process of African American women for career advancement?

### **Role of the Researcher**

Qualitative researchers must take care to fulfill the expectations of their field of research in presenting their work. When looking at the literature, a researcher refers to phenomenon deemed to be ‘true’ and changes an aspect(s) about the environment (e.g. location, demographic of the participant pool, or methodology) to expand upon the known phenomenon and uncover something new (Patton, 2015). The researcher must be

mindful of and open to the emergence of new knowledge by considering that two concepts thought to be unrelated could have a link or relationship (Gioia et al., 2013; Yilmaz, 2013). By publicizing that new knowledge, a researcher must also be open to potential criticism as readers synthesize the researcher's work for creditability, dependability, transferability, and confirmability of the data and whether to expand upon that work (Patton, 2015; Whitemore et al., 2001; Yilmaz, 2013).

The role of a researcher is to fill a gap in the literature by contributing new knowledge. The role of the researcher is not simple but rather consist of having the organizational ability to manage the research process and suspend any preconceived notions about the phenomenon to ensure accuracy of the results (Patton, 2015). The remainder of this section includes any personal or professional connection to participants, management of biases, and the plan to address any ethical issues.

### **Observer, Participant, or Observer-Participant**

The role that a researcher may play in a study include that of an observer, participant, or observer-participant. Which role a researcher plays depends upon the research design and where on the continuum a researcher has a perceived connection with the participants to participate (Patton, 2015). For example, when there is a weak connection between researcher and participants, e.g. a criminal justice researcher gaining detailed information from career criminals about how to commit crimes, a researcher may lean more heavily on the continuum as an observer than a participant (Patton, 2015). In other words, unless a researcher has personal relationships with the criminals as participants, the participants may deem the researcher as an outsider, thus, limiting the

opportunity to gain quality data. On the other hand, when there is a strong connection between researcher and participants, e.g. a criminal justice researcher gaining detailed information from career police investigators about how to catch criminals or stop crime, a researcher may lean more heavily on the continuum as a participant than an observer (Patton, 2015). In other words, although a researcher may not have personal relationships with police investigators as participants, these investigators may deem the researcher as an insider due to the linkage of career of the investigators and the researcher's field of study. The researcher has a choice of where on the continuum to be as an observer and participate. The danger of this choice is at the exclusion of details that could add value to the study and improve understanding of the phenomenon (Patton, 2015). How one researcher sees and interprets the world can be different from other researchers, thus, creating the challenge of what it means to present a credible study of quality (Patton, 2015).

As the research design of this study was qualitative phenomenological study, I saw my role as an observer-participant. There were several characteristics that I shared with the participants, which included being African American, a woman, and (in some cases) a current member of the financial services industry or past member of the health insurance industry with assumed similar experiences in striving for higher-level positions. I found other similar characteristics, which included level of education, childhood socio-economic status, age range, etc. This connection and range on the continuum also depended upon the perception of the participants as well (Patton, 2015).

### **Personal and Professional Connection**

The role of the researcher, in qualitative research, is more than about gaining insight about a phenomenon but also to gain quality data by understanding how people, the actual participants in the study, understand or perceive the phenomenon (Maxwell, 2013; Patton, 2015; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). For example, the researcher must have a sensitive nature about the phenomenon (Giorgi, 2012) and build trust with participants to enable the solicitation of detailed information that adds value to the study. Because I did not have a personal relationship with participants, I was responsible for ensuring that participants had a safe environment to speak openly and honestly and provided my full attention during the interview to demonstrate active listening. The connection with some of the participants was that of being an African American woman and with some being a current or past member of the financial or health insurance industry. There was no supervisory or instructor relationship. To reduce intentional groupthink, I sought to acquire participants by using snowball sampling. This type of sampling enabled me to gain an initial list of participants, which resulted in a continuous process of identifying other potential participants (Emerson, 2015). This process enabled me to gain insight from a wide range of experiences.

### **Managing Research Bias**

The ability to manage one's biases is imperative to the field of research. Researchers, as human beings, bring into research their set of beliefs, values, experiences, and perspectives of the world (Maxwell, 2013; Patton, 2015). As technology, mechanisms, and methods have changed over time, so has the increase in research

approaches and ways of thinking about the world (Audretsch, 2012; Patton, 2015). The researcher is responsible for understanding that peoples' perceptions are their personal realities (or truths) while remaining objective and separate from the described experiences told by the participants (Yilmaz, 2013). A researcher must also be cognizant of personal biases and ensure the transparency in the reporting of those biases (Patton, 2015; Whittmore, Chase, & Mandle, 2001; Yilmaz, 2013). As participants describe their experiences, a researcher must be aware of not just the verbal communication and tone but also the non-verbal communication or body language during the interview process (Patton, 2015). For this study, I had to keep in mind that my experiences were my own and was not to be insinuated into the interview process, verbally or non-verbally.

### **Addressing Ethical Issues**

Prior to being allowed to perform research in the field, an institutional review board (IRB) application must be completed, submitted, and approved. The purpose of the IRB is to ensure that Walden University research meets the ethical standards established by the University, the federal government, and internationally regarding the methods by which researchers perform their studies (Walden University, n.d.b). In addition to ensuring compliance with ethical standards, the IRB is responsible for determining whether the benefit of conducting the proposed research outweighs the cost (Walden University, n.d.b). The required IRB application enables the IRB to collect information about the proposed research to make that determination. One can equate the practice and oversight of research to the doctor's oath to do no harm.

There were several tasks that I performed, inclusive of completing the IRB application. The participants of this study were not of a protected class and there was not any experimentation on the participants, so there were no ethical concerns about the group under study. I provided a consent form along with all pertinent information to all participants involved as well as conducted recorded confirmations from participants to ensure informed consent. Interviews were confidential as a coding system was in place (i.e. P1 (to represent participant number one) through potential P20) to assist in hiding participants' identities and securing their confidentiality. I secured the results in a password protected computer and transferred the results onto a flash drive now held in a safe deposit box to mitigate the effect of data leakages, which includes intentional and un-intentional destruction of data transcripts, up to five years from the date of final study approval (Walden University, n.d.b). I informed participants of their right to withdraw from the study at any time and for any reason, which included their right to their privacy by not responding to any question that they did not feel comfortable with responding. I ensured that I was accessible to participants for any questions or concerns that they had. To ensure that I was well informed about ethical standards, a requirement of Walden University was to complete some form of Human Research Protections training that issued a certificate (Walden University, n.d.b). If I were to experience any ethical challenges, I knew that not only did I have my committee to refer but also the IRB in a group format for advice (Walden University, n.d.c).

## **Methodology**

Research cannot be replicated without a description of how the researcher conducted the study. A qualitative study must stay true to fulfilling the purpose of the study through being thorough, holistic, and thoughtful in planning and executing the methods and processes (Patton, 2015; Salvador, 2016). The study must be inclusive of the researcher's reflections how his or her perspectives may have impacted the questions asked of participants, thorough documentation of the procedures and methods used throughout the process, and acknowledgement of any limitations (Patton, 2015). The judgment of whether a qualitative study is credible or of quality is dependent upon the perspective or lens of the reader (Patton, 2015; Salvador, 2016). Because I am aware of potential criticisms of my study, I took care to follow the criteria for writing a qualitative dissertation and feedback from my committee.

A research methodology consists of the criteria or processes for how a researcher performs a study and allows for future researchers to follow the same or similar path. In other words, the methodology represents how the researcher collected and analyzed the data (Cleary et al., 2014; Salvador, 2016). Although no regularity or uniformity of criteria or process could exist because of the complexity and variety of human experiences and perspectives of the world, pre-planning allowed for some form of rigor in developing research, regardless of whether the research was qualitative or quantitative (Cleary et al., 2014; Patton, 2015). This section describes the criteria and process used for performing this study.

### **Participant Selection Logic**

The appropriate selection of research participants can take the form of any number of sampling strategies. Patton (2015) identified 40 different sampling strategies deemed purposeful, but the sampling strategy selected for this study was snowball sampling. Snowball sampling or chain sampling refers to the process in which a researcher connects with potential participants or someone who knows of potential participants to then refer the researcher to other potential participants and then the process repeats of connecting with additional potential participants towards achieving the number of specified participants or sample size (Emerson, 2015; Miles et al., 2014; Noy, 2008; Patton, 2015). As the number of participants for this study was difficult to connect with on my own (Beckwith et al., 2016), snowball sampling was the most appropriate strategy for this study.

As part of snowball sampling, there were two VPs who assisted in improving my chances of securing the 20 relevant participants towards my participant number goal. There was no compensation involved for the VPs providing a list of potential participants. I was not their supervisor, they were not my supervisor, nor were they supervisors of these potential participants as they were members of different departments and organizations, which eliminated the risk of influence. The connection that I had with the VPs was that one individual was a member of the same employee affinity group for African Americans and the other individual was my supervisor and at the time of this study an internal client. Because both individuals came from other organizations than



current at the time of this study, they had connections that I would have otherwise not had access.

The criteria established for the participant pool was to secure participation from 20 senior-level African American women as a past or present role. Age was not part of the criteria because an assumption was that most participants would be over the age of 30 years old due to time to meet the qualifications to gain such a role, but age served as a timeline for progression towards their position. The senior-level positions considered for this study included vice president and higher.

The intended sample size for this study was a minimum of 12 participants or until saturation occurs at a maximum of 20. The initial connection with VPs helped to facilitate reaching the goal of 12 participants. The selection of 12 to 20 participants as a sample size was due to the average number being common in qualitative research for reaching saturation, which is the point of when responses become redundant or recurring themes emerge for each research question (Cleary et al. 2014). An introductory email was sent to each identified individual to ask for their participation in the study and provided high-level information about the purpose and expectations of the study and participation. I asked each contact to share the email with everyone who met the criteria of being an African American woman in a vice president role or higher (past or present) and would like to give voice to the study. The eventual list was secured in a password protected computer and then flash drive to ensure the confidentiality of participants. The participant list and all research results will be destroyed after five years upon completion of study, as established as the minimum requirement in the IRB Application (Walden University,

n.d.b). The destruction will consist of taking a hammer and smashing the flash drive, which will make the tool unusable, and taking my computer to a computer specialty company to scrub the list and results from my computer.

### **Instrumentation**

There are many ways in which a researcher can collect data. In qualitative research, the main instrument is the researcher as the means to collect and analyze data and report results. As the main instrument in a qualitative research, the researcher has a responsibility to build a level of trust with participants and maintain the ethical procedures in doing so (Cleary et al., 2014; Maxwell, 2013; Patton, 2015).

Communication with participants was key to initiating relationships towards gaining a level of trust to uncover their decision-making strategies in gaining a senior-level position (Cleary et al., 2014). Additionally, part of building trust was through actively listening and having a sense of empathy towards the lived experiences of these women and observing how they told their stories (Maxwell, 2013; Patton, 2015). Although building relationships is important to gaining access to the necessary information, extensive access was not particularly necessary to uncover the what and how of their strategies (Maxwell, 2013). The ability to ethically navigate the relationship helped to achieve the goal of answering the research questions (Maxwell, 2013).

There are many data collection sources for a researcher to select, particularly as a means of triangulation. Triangulation increases the probability of the data being reliable and strengthens the credibility of the study through the ability to cross-check the data via recording the interviews, field notes, NVivo 12, and member checking (Baxter & Jack,

2008; Cronin, 2014; Maxwell, 2013). The use of NVivo, which is one of the more popular computers assisted qualitative data analysis (CAQDAS) tools, was a useful tool in capturing the data, enabling ease of and reducing time for triangulation of the data, and increasing the quality of data towards credibility of the study (AlYahmady & Alabri, 2013). I used member checking to verify that the transcriptions reflected participants' responses (Yilmaz, 2013). After I uploaded each transcription into NVivo 12, I was then able to analyze and construct themes in response to the research questions. Sources of data collection can include in-depth interviews, focus groups, observations, archival records, audiovisual materials, and other documents (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Cleary et al. 2014; Salvador, 2016; Yilmaz, 2013). For this study, I used in-depth interviews, observations, member checking, field notes, and participants' resumes.

**Interviews.** Unlike quantitative studies that use surveys, interviews provide researchers an opportunity to ask participants for in-depth details to get to the meaning of a phenomenon (Yilmaz, 2013). Interviews are not only about what behavior was done, although that would be important, but the rationale or context behind the conduct or behavior as perceived by the interviewee (Maxwell, 2013). There are three basic interview structures that a researcher can use, which include structured, semi-structured, and unstructured (Brinkman, 2014). Each type of structure is a means to express a placement on a continuum as no interview is totally free of structure or fully structured (Brinkman, 2014). The type of interview selected for this study was semi-structured, which allowed for the flexibility to better engage the participants and enough structure to

better prepare for the interview and get the answers necessary for the study (Patton, 2015).

**Observations.** The observations by the researcher can also tell a story. Merriam-Webster referred to an observation as “the act of careful watching and listening: the activity of paying close attention to someone or something in order to get information”. During the interview, a researcher has the opportunity to observe the non-verbal cues of the participants in reaction to the research questions and in the way that they respond (Maxwell, 2013; Patton, 2015). Did the participant appear uncomfortable with the question? Was there a sense of happiness or sadness in the participant’s tone in responding to the question? At the same time, the researcher must be cognizant of the non-verbal cues displayed to the participant, which could unintentionally influence the way in which the participant responds or reacts (Maxwell, 2013).

**Documents.** The right document can serve as supportive documentation towards completing the interview and triangulation. In advance of the interview, an interview guide is a useful tool in driving consistency in the interview questions and ensuring the formatting of the questions allow for capturing of enough accurate, in-depth details for the study (Patton, 2015). Because participants shared their lived experiences regarding their decision-making strategies (good and bad), their resume also shed light on how those decisions manifested. Although the resume helped to support the stories by participants in terms of timelines and role progression, there still existed the potential for self-report bias, e.g. role/titles (Maxwell, 2013). Field notes helped to capture my thoughts, observations, and actions taken while conducting field work (Patton, 2015).

## **Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection**

**Recruitment.** As the number of African American women in senior-level positions were difficult to recruit on my own (Beckwith et al., 2016), snowball sampling was the most appropriate strategy for this study. As I began my doctoral journey some time ago, I shared with friends and acquaintances at work the topic of my dissertation and that I would be looking for participants in the future. There are VPs who committed to referring potential candidates that met the criteria of being a senior-level African American woman. I originally connected with an organization with a focus on African Americans to assist with referring potential candidates for the study, but I was unable to secure of a formal letter of agreement from the representative of the organization. The missed opportunity to utilize the connections of the organization may have prolonged my progress towards reaching the number of participants, but my connection with the VPs proved useful. I had one-on-one conversations with the VPs to provide clarity about the study, answer questions, and whether an opportunity existed to refer potential candidates. The result of using the snowball sampling strategy was the continuous request for referrals that allowed for acquiring a minimum of 12 participants until data saturation up to 20 participants. A stated minimum of 12 allowed for the flexibility to acquire more participants, if necessary, as themes and categories emerged (Patton, 2015). I created and forwarded an introductory email to potential participants about my study that included a request for their assistance in providing their voice and begin the process of building trust. The field work with participants took place after the Proposal and IRB Application approvals.

**Participation.** The plan for the interview and data collection, regardless of any issues or delays in the research process, was a logical flow of connecting with participants and acquiring the appropriate and detailed data through open-ended interview questions. The participants, who consisted of 12 senior-level African American women, received:

- A formal consent form, which included participation as voluntary, commitment expectations, the right to withdraw at any time, and confidentiality
- An acknowledgment of form receipt with date and time options for a minimum of 60- to 75-minute online interview (refer to the Data Collection section for details on conducting these online interviews)
- Confirmation of the online tool that was used for recording the interview to ensure technological capabilities and compatibilities towards recording the interview
- A reiteration of consent during the interview to confirm that they understood the intricacies of the interview and process, e.g. purpose of the study, their role, how the data would be used and stored, etc.
- The same open-ended interview questions to ensure consistency in data collection, receipt of in-depth information, and realization of a saturation point
- Follow-up email to ensure clarity and accuracy of their responses (i.e. member checking)

- A thank you email for their participation with a copy of the final study at the conclusion of final dissertation approval

**Data collection.** The main method of collecting qualitative data was by conducting interviews. In a technology driven world, online interviewing is an option for many researchers, who ordinarily would not have access or opportunity to reach their participants in-person. By conducting the interviews face-to-face via online technology for this study, I was able to reach participants anywhere in the country and reduced the time constraints in meeting with participants in-person face-to-face interviews requiring travel time to and from the location (Deakin & Wakefield, 2013). Alternatives to this method of data collection was face-to-face in-person interviews and telephone interviews.

For this study, the online Internet technologies that I used to video record the interviews included Google Hangouts and Skype. I confirmed whether participants had either of these online technologies. There were positives and negatives to online interviewing. A positive was the ability to reach participants anywhere in the world and allowed for the reduction of time constraints in comparison to in-person face-to-face interviews (Deakin & Wakefield, 2013). With the use of visual and auditory technology, participants are able to receive acknowledgment or reassurance of their responses by the researcher's head nodding and other vocal ticks, e.g. 'uh-huh' or 'um-hum' (Patton, 2015). To be proactive in anticipation of potential issues, I created a list of potential issues and the actions that I would take as a guide and as illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1

*List of Potential Issues and Actions*

Potential Issue	I would...
The inability to validate the identity of the participant without the physical contact that in-person provides and lack of technological ability to participate (e.g. no Internet or latest computer technology) or financial (e.g. funds to pay for the Internet or latest computer) means to engage in online interviews (Deakin & Wakefield, 2013).	Defer to the person who referred the participant to confirm identification and use the participant's company's website and LinkedIn account to access a picture of the person to confirm.
The lack of in-person niceties, e.g. no hand-shake as part of the introduction (Deakin & Wakefield, 2013).	Use virtual niceties, e.g. smiling, congenial welcome, and expression of appreciation for participating in the study.
The possibility of the screen freezing or audio failing with online interviewing (Deakin & Wakefield, 2013).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ask participant to restart the technology.</li> <li>• If still an issue, do one of the options most convenient for the participant: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Walk participant through potential fixes.</li> <li>○ Determine if participant was willing to use an alternate online technology, e.g. Hangouts instead of Skype or vice-versa.</li> <li>○ Recommend a face-to-face or phone interview.</li> </ul> </li> </ul> Reschedule the interview.
Participant does not use Google Hangouts or Skype but does have a different online technology with recording capability.	Download the online technology that the person has or recommend a face-to-face or phone interview (whichever is most convenient).
Participant does not use Google Hangouts, Skype, or any online technology but willing to download.	Recommend that the person downloads a preferred online technology, i.e. Google Hangouts or Skype, and assist the person with downloading, if necessary.

*(table continues)*



Potential Issue	I would...
Participant does not use Google Hangouts, Skype, or any online technology and unwilling to download.	Request a face-to-face or phone interview (whichever is most convenient).

I took field notes and referred to their resumes as secondary resources towards the triangulation of data. Field notes are a researcher's way to be able to fill the gap where all other data collection methods during the interview may miss an observation as well serve as a confirmation of an interview (Miles et al, 2014). Because data could become unwieldy and consume an enormous amount of time to analyze without the proper storage mechanism, there is importance in the researcher being disciplined in organizing the data immediately after the interview for meaningful usage and later analysis (Maxwell, 2013). The resume helped to illustrate the participants' career progression and support their stories. I also used member checking, which is the process of clarifying and verifying the interpretation of the data via the participants (Baxter & Jack, 2008), before submission of the transcription to be entered into NVivo 12.

### **Data Analysis Plan**

The construction of the data analysis plan depends upon the research design and how the researcher wants to interact with the participants and receive the data. For this study, the research design was a qualitative phenomenological study. From a phenomenological perspective, the process of analysis "seeks to grasp and elucidate the meaning, structure, and essence of the lived experiences of a phenomenon for a person or group of people" (Patton, 2015, p. 573). An important aspect of being able to accurately

interpret the lived experiences of the participants was the ability to acknowledge any preconceived notions about the phenomenon and be open to others' perspectives as their truth (Patton, 2015). The data analysis plan consisted of accurately interpreting the data by organizing the content and identifying patterns and themes to report a holistic depiction or meaning of the lived experiences of senior-level African American women. There was a three-step process, as described by Patton, which included gathering the data, organizing the data in a manageable manner, and then presenting a holistic picture of the phenomenon that is meaningful to the reader. To organize the data in a manageable manner, a researcher can use coding to classify or categorize the data to appropriately interpret meaning from participants' experiences (Cho & Lee, 2014; Miles et al., 2014).

Coding is a numeric representation or naming convention of the participants to maintain their confidentiality. There are two types of coding methods: inductive and deductive coding (Cho & Lee, 2014; Miles et al., 2014; Patton, 2015). Inductive coding involves the development or emergence of categories or themes during data collection when there is little to no known information about a phenomenon (Patton, 2015). These themes should be well-defined (Miles et al., 2014). Deductive coding, or pre-coding, is about establishing categories based on past literature and research used to further prior literature or research work (Cho & Lee, 2014). The highest concern about deductive coding in qualitative research is the potential for a researcher to ignore or not be open to other themes or categories that may emerge or a change to a category (Cho & Lee, 2014; Miles et al., 2014). Matrices help to illustrate the data, but the decision then becomes

whether to perform the development of the matrices manually or through electronic means (Patton, 2015).

With large amounts of data and with current technological advances, there is the opportunity for a researcher to store data within a computer assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) program (e.g. NVivo). NVivo, produced by QSR International, is a software qualitative tool to help a researcher manage data in terms of analyses and coding of data, which reduces time in categorizing and making connections of the data and increases the credibility of the study (Miles et al., 2014). The type of analysis considered for this study was classical content analysis, which displays the emergence of themes (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2011) to produce holistic final results (Patton, 2015). The input for using NVivo 12 consisted of the transcriptions from recorded interviews, which resulted in the analysis and interpretation of the results towards the development of themes and answering the research questions.

Although a researcher can be careful in the data collection and analysis process, there is still a chance of the output of the data result in outliers. An outlier, or discrepant case, refers to an element of the data that is inconsistent with the overall dataset or model (Patton, 2015). Four potential reasons for an outlier could be the misinterpretation of the data by the researcher, misrepresentation by the participant of the facts, the themes or categories are too broad or specific or do not represent the data effectively, or the participant was not a fit for the study (Patton, 2015). The responsibility of the researcher is to determine how the outlier happened and then resolve in the most efficient manner (Patton, 2015). With an instance of an outlier in the data, I recognized that I had to

determine the cause of the outlier by reassessing the steps taken and content to determine results, resulting in new or still outlier, clarifying points with the participant to readjust the data for new results or still outlier, or reassessing the themes and categories for adjustment to better fit the data. Upon finding an outlier response, I knew the importance of acknowledging the outlier in the study, stipulating how the sample impacted the study, and discounting the outlier from the holistic view of the data, particularly if there was an extreme case (Patton, 2015).

### **Issues of Trustworthiness**

The trustworthiness of a study is one of the more important aspects of a study for the sake of usability and transferability of the study. For all the work that goes into performing research, a qualitative researcher has the more difficult role of proving the trustworthiness of the results versus a quantitative researcher (Miles et al., 2014). This difficulty is because quantitative has statistical data to support the results and qualitative is a cluster of subjective data reliant on the researcher as the interpreter (Miles et al., 2014; Patton, 2015). Part of a researcher's plan in performing a study should be a strategy for ensuring the quality of the work. The four categories deemed standards of quality or rigor, included credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Patton, 2015).

Credibility is a qualitative term that is equivalent to the quantitative term of internal validity. Each term refers to the authenticity of the study. To ensure credibility in this study, there were multiple resources towards triangulation of the data, which increased the probability of the data being reliable (Cronin, 2014; Maxwell, 2013; Miles

et al., 2014; Patton, 2015). Those resources included the interviews from multiple participants with differing experiences, member checking, field notes, and participants' resumes. The tool in assisting with this triangulation was the qualitative software - NVivo.

Transferability is a qualitative term that is equivalent to the quantitative term of external validity. In either case, each term refers to the extent of which the reader (external source) can use the finding and apply to their own situation, setting, or context (Miles et al., 2014). By stipulating enough descriptive information about steps taken, the participants, setting, and other research elements, another researcher can replicate in other studies (Miles et al., 2014). In this study, the methodology section of Chapter 3 provided the direction, information on the participants and setting, and other elements of the study to provide guidance for future research.

Dependability is a qualitative term that is equivalent to the quantitative term of reliability. Each term refers to the integrity of the study, which is the extent to which there is documentation to substantiate elements of the study (e.g. the rationale behind the selection of research design, research questions, participants, steps taken, and other elements) (Miles et al., 2014). NVivo is a source for housing research and providing for an audit trail of information (Houghton et al., 2013; Miles et al., 2014), which was the qualitative tool used for this study. The latest version for this study was NVivo 12. Field notes were also a source to depict observations along a time continuum.

Confirmability is a qualitative term that is equivalent to the quantitative term of objectivity, which can be the more difficult task for a qualitative researcher. As a human

being, a researcher has a set of beliefs, assumptions, and experiences that could impact the objectivity of the researcher (Miles et al., 2014). As such, I knew that I was to be self-aware of any biases that I had, set aside any preconceived notions about the phenomenon, and acknowledge those elements within the study as a confession of sorts for the reader to reconcile with the results of the study (Miles et al., 2014). By ensuring that I met the expectations of performing a qualitative study, inclusive of the other elements of trustworthiness (e.g. credibility, transferability, and confirmability) and documenting my awareness of any biases or preconception that I had, I performed the necessary actions to demonstrate the confirmability of my findings. Part of ensuring the trustworthiness of a study was by following ethical procedures as established through the University's IRB and national and international laws and regulations to conduct the study.

### **Ethical Procedures**

Field work is an important aspect of research that must have some form of oversight to ensure the integrity of the study which includes safety and ethical handling of participants. The entity which has oversight, specifically over research by doctoral candidates, is the institutional review board (IRB). The IRB defers to the laws and regulations of national agencies (e.g. the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS)) and international agencies (e.g. the United Nations with the UN Declaration of Human Rights) to establish and maintain codes of conduct or ethical standards within the professional and learning communities (Sugiura, Wiles, & Pope, 2016).

A doctoral candidate must adhere to these ethical standards by performing certain actions. Prior to any doctoral candidate performing field work, which includes the

recruitment of participants and signing of consent forms, the candidate must communicate the details of the study to begin the review process as a requirement of the ethical standards established by the IRB (Walden University, n.d.b). The doctoral candidate has the responsibility to provide those details to the IRB by submitting a completed IRB application to gain approval to do research in the field. A candidate cannot submit until formal confirmation of approval for the oral defense of the research proposal (Walden University, n.d.b). Approval by the IRB, which last up to one year towards completion of the study, signifies that the probative value of the study outweighs any risks and meets regulatory standards (Walden University, n.d.b). In addition to the completion of an IRB, a candidate must gain a Human Research Protections training completion certificate towards IRB approval.

Traditional ethical issues included elements in the physical space, but the new ethical issue relates to the virtual space. Technology has risen to heights that the IRB, national, and international laws and regulations have difficulty with keeping pace (Sugiura et al., 2016). For example, Sugiura et al. described the accessibility of blogs and discussion boards where the concern is public text versus right to privacy, since people are putting their opinions, life experiences, and other personal information in public space (e.g. Facebook, Tweets, and other social media), the question becomes whether a consent to use the information would be a requirement to use the data towards research. There would be no need to recruit participants as there is easy accessibility to several datasets in the virtual space. From an ethical perspective, members or participants of blogs or discussion boards may view use of their text as an invasion or some form of threatening or

coercive measure that could cause legal issues for the researcher or owner of the virtual tool (Sugiura et al., 2016). This study used technology (i.e. email and cellphone) to connect with participants and after receipt of a consent form, which served as an element to ensure the ethical responsibility of this study.

To illustrate ethical responsibility, a researcher should take care to equip participants with detailed knowledge and an understanding of the study and their part in the study (Sugiura et al., 2016). This knowledge enabled participants to make an informed decision about their participation in the study. I informed participants of their right to withdraw from the study at any time and for any reason as part of the consent form and verbally before the interview, which included their right to their privacy by not responding to any question that they would not feel comfortable with responding. Of concern by participants was their ability to secure the confidentiality of their identity and responses. The issue then became how to quote participants without giving away their identity (Sugiura et al., 2016). Their words could have provided certain cues as to who said what, regardless of hiding their identity via coding, which could have become problematic for the participant professionally or personally. A solution was to eliminate non-key words or paraphrase their words to still express their thoughts, feelings, and understanding of their experiences (Sugiura et al., 2016). The use of member checking confirmed the accuracy of the interpretation of their quotes. Another concern was the use of their resumes. Part of the information to be provided to participants is an explanation about the use of the resumes and illustrate the ethical use of the resume with member



checking to confirm accurate but confidential applicability of their resumes within the study.

Protection of participants' identity also includes protection of the data. Traditional means of securing hard copy data included filing cabinets, lockboxes, and safe deposit boxes. Today's technology provides the means to store soft copy data whether on a computer or in the Cloud technology. All data for this study was secured in a password protected computer. This secured location helped to mitigate the effect of data leakages, which included intentional and un-intentional destruction of data transcripts, up to five years from the date of gaining final approval of the study (Walden University, n.d.b). I stored the data and results via my email account and a flash drive. The flash drive was placed in a safe deposit box, while the data in my email has a designated folder for storage. Storing the data on my laptop would not have been a good option as the physicality of a laptop would eventually become obsolete with the development of new technology (software and hardware) and would need to be discarded as recyclable trash.

### **Summary**

The elements of Chapter 3 focused on the research design and rationale, role of the researcher, methodology, and issues of trustworthiness. The research design for this study was a qualitative phenomenological study. The rationale for using this research design was to explore the why and how something exists or takes place with the results illustrated in a detailed, descriptive, textual form (Cronin, 2014; Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2007; Miles et al., 2014; Patton, 2015; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). My role, as the researcher, depicted multifaceted elements with the overarching purpose of fulfilling the

expectations of the field of research in presenting the work. The methodology for this study consisted of the researcher as the main collection and analytical tool with the assistance of semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions, NVivo as a software data storage and analytical tool, resumes, and member checking. In terms of establishing a level of rigor, a researcher must be cognizant that if unable to ensure the credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of the study, then there could be a lack of trustworthiness by the readers.

Chapter 4 sets the stage for the actual collection and analysis of the data. This chapter depicted the field work done and actions taken as proposed in Chapter 3. The elements in Chapter 4 includes an introduction to the chapter, setting, demographics of participants, data collection, data analysis, evidence of trustworthiness, and results of the fieldwork.

## Chapter 4: Results

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to understand the lived experiences regarding career advancement decision-making strategies for senior-level African American women. The results of this study may provide data that organizational and HR leaders can use to reflect on and reconsider the effectiveness of their policies, programs, and strategies on recruitment, talent management, diversity and inclusion policies and programs, and succession planning. SCCT was the foundation for uncovering the lived experiences of the selected participants.

Chapter 4 focuses on several elements of the results for this study, which includes the setting, demographics, data collection, data analysis, evidence of trustworthiness, and results. The setting section describes any influential factors that may have impacted participants and thus participants' responses for this study. The demographics section describes the personal attributes of the participants that were relevant to the study. The section on data collection depicts the population of the study, the process for data collection, and any variations and unusual circumstances experienced as a result of the data collection. The data analysis section describes the process of analyzing the data. The evidence of trustworthiness section depicts the four categories deemed standard for quality or rigor: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Houghton et al., 2013; Patton, 2015). The results section shows the research findings in relation to the research questions, as well as any inconsistencies, if applicable.

The central questions were:

*RQ1:* What decisions-making strategies do African American women use to attain senior-level management positions?

*RQ2:* How have facets of social cognitive career theory (SCCT) (e.g. self-efficacy beliefs, outcome expectations, and personal goals) impacted the decision-making process of African American women for career advancement?

### **Research Setting**

To increase the likelihood of gaining the requisite number of participants, I elected to use snowball sampling, where initially identified participants referred other individuals who fit the criteria, leading to a continuous process of newly identified participants referring other potential participants (Emerson, 2015; Noy, 2008). I solicited the assistance of two VPs of an organization and who were aware of my research topic and my need to locate current or past senior-level African American women. Through their assistance, I was able to locate the requisite number of participants for my study, which was a minimum of 12 participants.

Due to the difficulty in locating participants that met the criteria, the option of meeting in person was not optimal. It was most appropriate for this study that I use technology with remote connectivity to perform these interviews and allow for each participant to determine the appropriate location to speak freely about the research topic. My location was in the den of my home. Participants lived in various locations throughout the United States and met with me either from their homes or offices/meeting rooms at work.

### **Demographics**

The participant criteria for this study were that participants had to be African American, women, and either currently serving or have previously served in a senior-level position (e.g. VP or higher level or equivalent officership depending upon type of industry). I elected not to limit which sector (public or private) to secure participants nor the industry because of the difficulty in locating senior-level African American women. I also did not limit the age range of participants for the same reason. I foresee a future study that may place specific parameters, such as sector, industry, or age, as the number of African American women in senior-level positions increases.

### **Data Collection**

The data collection process encompassed a series of planned activities resulting in information that can be used towards filling a gap in the literature. Sources of data collection can include in-depth interviews, focus groups, observations, archival records, audiovisual materials, and other documents (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Cleary et al. 2014; Salvador, 2016; Yilmaz, 2013). For this study, I used interviews, observations, member checking, field notes, and participants' resumes. The main activity in connecting with participants was the process of interviewing. Due to the difficulty in locating participants that met the criteria, the process of securing and interviewing participants took approximately 3 months to complete. The remainder of this section on data collection focuses on the three stages of interviewing participants (interview pre-work, interview, interview post-work), inclusive of other data collection sources and instrumentation.

### **Interview Pre-Work**

The steps taken in preparation of interviews required careful planning to ensure an adequate number of participants, making a record of participants, and tracking the activities necessary to set up the interviews. As indicated in Chapter 3, the identified VPs offered access to potential candidates that provided the means to perform snowball sampling. In forwarding my research invitations through the VPs and their network connections and after acknowledgment of the consent forms by those connections, I was able to arrange interview sessions with 12 current and past senior-level African American women willing to share their career advancement decision-making stories. The rationale behind ending my search at a maximum of 12 participants was because I was able to quickly realize saturation with the responses from the first nine participants.

To track the attainment of participants and interview activities, I created a spreadsheet to record participant names and contact information, the dates of sending and receiving documentation (invitations, consent forms, and transcripts), and dates and times of interviews. Due to the busy schedules of some of the participants, keeping record of the activities was helpful because I did have to send follow-up emails to gain responses to the invitations, consent requests, and requests for interview dates and times. Emails (via my Walden account) and text messages were the methods of communication with regard to participants for the invitations, consent forms, lists of interview questions for preview, and arrangements of the interview dates and times.

Additional activities were necessary to complete the pre-work. I forwarded the list of interview questions prior to the interview to allow time for participants to reflect and

consider what information they wanted to share as well as for transparency of the questions to eliminate any potential surprises during the interview. Continued reviewing of videos and audio and envisioning how I would proceed with the interviews further helped in the interview preparation. As a result of reviewing videos and envisioning my performance, I became conscious of the need to add a tab to the spreadsheet to capture field notes. To ensure the triangulation of the data, I viewed participants' career history through receipt of resumes and access to LinkedIn profiles with the exception of one participant, who I had personal knowledge of being in a senior-level leadership role.

### **Interview Day**

On the day of each interview, I interviewed participants face-to-face via a cell phone using the FaceTime application and transcribed the interviews. To capture the audio portion of the interview, I elected to use a digital voice recorder. By using the recorder, I had the opportunity to later transcribe the interview into a documented record as a means to perform member checking. The estimated duration set for performing interviews was 60 to 75 minutes. The actual duration of the interviews ranged from 30 to 45 minutes. When I thought it was most appropriate, I asked follow-up or clarifying questions to gather more details. There was one mishap during an interview where I skipped one question. Although I provided the specific participant with an opportunity to respond to the missed question via email, this resulted in no response; however, this participant provided a breadth of information that was necessary for answering the missed interview question.

### **Interview Post-Work**

After the completion of each interview, there were a few steps that I performed for data analysis. I downloaded and saved each interview from the digital voice recorder to a folder on my laptop, played the recording from my laptop to ensure correctness of downloading, and then deleted the recording from the digital voice recorder. I referred to my spreadsheet to change the font of the interview date and time from black to red as an indication of interview completion on the tab marked *Participant* and captured my observations of the interviews on the tab designated for field notes. I later transcribed the recordings to text via a Microsoft Word application and forwarded the transcriptions to participants via email to confirm that I documented their responses correctly (or member checking). Member checking allowed for satisfying the requirement of triangulation with the inclusion of their career history (or resume).

To finalize the interview post-work stage, there were two participants who responded with transcription corrections. The conversational language of one transcription resembled formal writing of text with bulleted lists to highlight points. The second correction left much of the conversational language with minor tweaks to reduce non-essential words (e.g., *you know*, etc.) and added breaks in sentences where the participant deemed necessary (e.g. eliminated some of the connecting words, such as *and so*, and adding periods and capital letters to begin a new sentence). With transcriptions finalized, the next step was to organize the data in a manageable manner.



## Field Notes

The creation of field notes was a means to secure additional secondary data, beyond the resumes. Field notes helped to capture my thoughts, observations, and actions taken while conducting fieldwork (Patton, 2015). I found this exercise to be conducive to reflectivity and self-awareness.

Although I practiced interviewing and viewed videos on interviewing, the emotional stress of preparing, performing, and doing well to transcribe the responses of participants accurately was high. My highest level of stress was due to the slow rate of acquiring the requisite number of participants towards the beginning of data collection. My note made at the beginning of searching for participants read:

*This is really becoming frustrating. Starting to question whether my selection of participants was smart because of the difficulty in finding people.*

I connected with my Chair a short time after I made this note to express my concerns, and she encouraged me to refer to other resources, such as Facebook, to locate participants. The mention of Facebook reminded me of my LinkedIn network, which helped to increase responses to my research invitation. There was also a time when I had to reschedule an interview a few times due to a personal issue on my part, which I expressed my thankfulness to the participant for her patience. With the experience of slowly gaining participants, I remembered the advice received during coursework and the residencies. I wished that I had fully understood the advice of ensuring not to select a topic that would not allow you to graduate within your desired timeframe. My lesson

learned was doing the research that I want to do should have taken the form of future research versus the research that I needed to do for graduation.

My expectation was that I would find similarities to my own experiences while listening to participants and not to say or do anything that would influence their responses. I found refraining from sharing my experience not an easy feat but one of necessity to not take away from what HR and organizational leaders, as well as other women and minorities, could learn. I made sure to be attentive by vocalizing and showing acknowledgment for points made by nodding my head, voicing agreement, and asking for clarity at times.

Although all participants appeared excited about the topic of the study, sharing their lived experience related to career development as an African American woman was easier for some participants than others. For example, one of the notes I made about a participant was:

*I also noticed that she appeared guarded with her words and then became more relaxed as the interview went along and especially after she asked, and I provided her with the level of alignment of her responses to other interviewees and the research.*

For another participant, I feared that I did not ask questions correctly, but realized that the participant's comfort level increased over the course of the interview as I noted:

*She didn't mention anything that screamed elements specifically pertinent to African American women. I wondered if my questions weren't direct enough to get that specific kind of information. She did, however, later looked relaxed and became open in telling her story.*

By the end of the interview for those who began guarded, they were open and gracious in sharing their experiences and provided the requisite amount of insight for the study.

FaceTime was the Apple technology used to perform the interview. There were times of technical difficulties, such as freezing of the video or participants using the technology for the first time. One of the notes that I made was because I noticed the lack of confidence by the participant in using Facetime:

*For the first part of the interview, I saw the ceiling, and then I saw but half of her face for the remainder of the time. Because I mentioned once about not being able to see the participant, I didn't want to appear rude in mentioning it again.*

We were able to successfully overcome those issues with patience and finding the issue as humorous.

### **Data Analysis**

As described in Chapter 3, the data analysis consisted of accurately interpreting the data by organizing the content and identifying patterns and themes to result in a holistic depiction or meaning of the lived experiences of senior-level African American women. To organize the data in a manageable manner, a researcher can use coding to classify or categorize the data to appropriately interpret meaning from participants' experiences (Cho & Lee, 2014; Miles et al., 2014). This section describes the process used to move inductively from coded units to themes, what emerged as significant, and any inconsistencies resulting from the analysis.

## **Coding Process and Tool**

There were two sets of coding used in this study: one as a numeric representation of the participants to maintain their confidentiality and another to categorize the data to appropriately interpret meaning from participants' experiences (Cho & Lee, 2014; Miles et al., 2014). As a representation of participants' names, I assigned numbers (e.g., P1, P2, etc.) to protect their identity and ensure confidentiality with the development of transcriptions and to make distinctions between participants' quotations within the study. I informed the participants of their numeric representation as part of the member checking to confirm that their names would not be used within the study and recognize where their quote(s) was/were in the study upon receipt of their copy of the finalized dissertation. For categorizing the data, there were two types of coding methods used for this study: deductive and inductive coding (Cho & Lee, 2014; Miles et al., 2014; Patton, 2015). Deductive coding involved establishing themes based on past literature and research (Cho & Lee, 2014), and inductive coding involved the emergence of categories or themes during data collection (Patton, 2015).

The tool used to assist with coding for this study was NVivo 12, which is the latest qualitative data analysis software as of the date of this paper. I never used NVivo, so I was intimidated about using the tool. As I searched on the QSR International company website, I found links to YouTube videos as instructions for how to use the tool. I later received a Walden University announcement with links to NVivo resources in the form of Walden tutors and an introductory video link to YouTube and transcript. I downloaded the tool once I was ready to analyze the data but began with practicing how

to use the tool. Once I was comfortable about proceeding, I then began the process of importing the data, identifying the themes and any sub-themes, and creating a graphical illustration of the data. From the date of first entering the data into the tool, the process of analyzing the data into a logical manner took 15 days, which I attributed to my being a novice user of the tool and wanting to be sure that my analysis of the data was the best possible.

### **Emergent Themes**

Based on the literature, I was able to deduce what significant themes to expect within my study, which included: education, family, and leadership/leadership development. Inductive coding began the moment of performing interviews. I recognized repetition of key points by review of the transcripts and confirmation of what I identified as repetitive by creating nodes for those key point within NVivo 12. With repetition and the use of NVivo 12, I was able to determine what additional significant themes emerged, which included religion/faith and authenticity and sub-themes.

### **Evidence of Trustworthiness**

The trustworthiness of a study is one of the more important aspects of a study for the sake of usability and transferability of the study. By engaging in methods for data gathering and data analysis and using the tools to assist with the methods, I was able to meet the requirements of the four categories deemed standard of quality or rigor. This section describes the evidence of trustworthiness in terms of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

Credibility refers to the authenticity of the study (Miles et al., 2014). To ensure credibility in this study, there were multiple resources towards triangulation of the data, which increased the probability of the data being reliable (Cronin, 2014; Maxwell, 2013; Miles et al., 2014; Patton, 2015). The interviews contained the participant's truths of their lived experiences, which heightened specific themes relative to their career advancement as African American women. I was able to connections with their interviews to their documented career histories, except for one participant's history as personal confirmation/knowledge of position (Yilmaz, 2013). By performing member-checking, I ensured the accuracy of what I heard from the participants during the interviews. The use of NVivo 12 was as a tool to house the transcriptions from the digitally recorded interviews to gain efficiencies with analyzing and interpreting the results towards the development and confirmation of patterns and themes. With these methods and tools in mind, I was able to create the conditions for transferability of my research.

Transferability refers to the to the extent of which the reader (external source) can use the findings and apply to their own situation, setting, or context (Miles et al., 2014). By stipulating enough descriptive information about the methods and tools used in my study, another researcher will be able to replicate in other studies (Miles et al., 2014). A reader or other researcher can refer to Chapter 3 Methodology section and Chapter 4 Data Collection and Data Analysis sections for a detailed accounting of the methods and tools used for this study to adopt for another study. For example, to ensure there would be enough details for another researcher to use, I provided enough specificity around the interview process - before, during, and after the interviewing (Yilmaz, 2013). One of the

tasks that was key to performing this study was keeping track of the processes for data gathering and data analysis, which leads to the topic of dependability.

Dependability refers to the integrity of the study, which is the extent to which there is documentation to substantiate elements of the study (Miles et al., 2014). Throughout this study, I incorporated the rationale behind the selection of research design, research questions, participants, steps taken, and other elements pertinent to facilitate an accurate accounting of this study. Two of the more important elements was the use of NVivo 12 and the creation of field notes as an audit trail of my actions, observations, thoughts, and collected data to then be able to triangulate into meaningful data. By ensuring that I met the expectations of performing a qualitative study, inclusive of the other elements of trustworthiness (e.g. credibility, transferability, and confirmability) and documenting my awareness of any biases or preconception that I had, I performed the necessary actions to demonstrate the confirmability of my findings.

Confirmability refers to being able to set aside any preconceived notions about the phenomenon and acknowledge those elements within the study as a confession of sorts for the reader to reconcile with the findings of the study (Miles et al., 2014). My responsibility and expectation of performing qualitative research was to listen to the lived experiences of the participants in detail, gain in-depth insight into their perceptions, beliefs, and assumptions of their worldview about the phenomenon, and then accurately interpret the meaning in relation to the phenomenon (Patton, 2015; Reiter, Stewart, & Bruce, 2011). With this responsibility and expectation as a researcher, there had to be acceptance of the participants' perceptions as being their personal realities (or truths)

while remaining objective and separate from the described experiences told by the participants (Yilmaz, 2013). I also had to be cognizant of any personal biases and ensure the transparency in the reporting of those biases (Patton, 2015; Whitemore, Chase, & Mandle, 2001; Yilmaz, 2013). To remain objective and create an audit trail for this study, I also documented any biases that I may have had in Chapter 3, made notes of any thoughts/feelings experienced in the form of field notes in Chapter 4, and used technology (NVivo 12) to confirm and derive at the themes described in this study instead of only relying on manual identification of themes (e.g. deductive coding and recognition of repetitive points during interviews).

### **Results**

The study consisted of 12 senior-level African American women, who were gracious in sharing their lived experiences regarding career advancement decision-making strategies and facets of self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and personal goals. The findings of this study may provide an opportunity for organizational and HR leaders to reconsider the effectiveness of their policies, programs, and strategies specifically around the recruitment, retention, talent management, and succession planning strategies for African American women. The findings may also raise awareness for other women and minorities regarding potential inputs and outputs of decisions towards career advancement to senior-level positions.

At this point, I think there is importance to ensure clarity of the information sought by gaining insight into the lived experiences of senior-level African American women. This clarity is about the decision-making strategies or processes of these women



towards career advancement through the lens of SCCT. Decision-making strategies refers to the process by which individuals ensure that their decisions are sound or logical and include clarification of the problem or knowledge to pursue, determination of the goal to obtain and what options are available, comparison and weighting of options in light of the goal, and selection of the best option with the remaining options as backup plans (Saaty, 2008). Retrieval of knowledge or experience, based on beliefs, values, or understanding of the problem, or collection of information helps to facilitate the decision-making process (Nachmias & Walmsley, 2015; Saaty, 2008). SCCT is about the content and process facets, or the what and how, of career development and behaviors across one's life span (Lent & Brown, 2013; Lim et al., 2016). With clarity of the elements, I now move onto the research questions.

The research questions served as the connection between what I wanted to know and understand and as a template for how to design the interview questions (Maxwell, 2013). With the two central research questions pertaining to decision-making strategies and SCCT, I designed the interview to consist of five demographic questions and then three RQ1 and seven RQ2 sub-questions. A sample of the interview protocol, including interview questions, is available in the Appendix, which helped to stay on target and as a guide to conversation. The type of analysis considered for this study was classical content analysis, which displays the emergence of themes (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2011) to produce holistic final findings (Patton, 2015). The tool used to assist with identifying these markers was NVivo 12, which was one of the more popular CAQDAS tools as of the date of this paper.

I used deductive and inductive coding to finalize the themes and sub-themes for this study. Prior to the interviewing of participants, I referred to the literature to deduce potential themes that would emerge but also recognized the potential for other themes to emerge as a result of interviewing. The themes that appeared prominent in the literature included: education, mentor/models, leadership development, networking, and family. After listening to the recordings and manually creating transcriptions of each interview, there was an initial assessment of data to determine what themes appeared prominent. Input of the interview data into NVivo 12 helped to confirm the prominence of the themes. Based on the context of the interviews, I elected to minimize the number of themes by placing the themes of mentor/roles and networking under leadership/leadership development. Inclusive of the themes deduced from literature, the additional themes that emerged included: religion/faith and authenticity.

The themes emerged early in the process of interviewing participants as commonalities in participants' stories quickly became repetitive. My stated sampling size for this study was a minimum of 12 participants until data saturation up to 20 participants. I was able to reach saturation after the completion of my ninth interview due to the quality of participants' stories (Fusch & Ness, 2015), but I proceeded to my stated minimum of 12 to ensure rigor. This section provides insights based on demographics and addresses each research question, the data to support each finding, and any inconsistencies in the data.

## Demographical Insights

The importance of capturing specific demographical information about the participants was to gain additional insight regarding their decision-making strategies and the facets of SCCT. Table 1 depicts the demographics of each participant, with range format for age and position responses to protect their identity and ensure confidentiality.

Table 2

### *Demographical Insights of Participants*

	<b>At what age did you first pursue a senior-level position (VP or higher)?</b>	<b>How many years did it take you to gain a senior-level position once you pursued?</b>	<b>What is your highest level of education (degree) completed?</b>	<b>What is your current senior-level position?</b>	<b>What do you believe was your socio-economic status during childhood?</b>
<b>P1</b>	30-39 yrs.	<1 yr.	Master's	VP	Middle
<b>P2</b>	<20 yrs.	4 yrs.	Master's	SVP	Working
<b>P3</b>	30-39 yrs.	10 yrs.	Bachelor's	CEO	Upper Mid
<b>P4</b>	30-39 yrs.	5 yrs.	Ph.D.	Board	Elite
<b>P5</b>	20-29 yrs.	3 yrs.	Master's	SVP	Lower/Poor
<b>P6</b>	30-39 yrs.	4 yrs.	Master's	VP	Middle
<b>P7</b>	40-49 yrs.	15-20 yrs.	Bachelor's	VP	Working
<b>P8</b>	30-39 yrs.	10 yrs.	Master's	Exec VP	Working
<b>P9</b>	30-39 yrs.	15 yrs.	High School	Board	Working
<b>P10</b>	20-29 yrs.	3 yrs.	Master's	VP	Middle
<b>P11</b>	30-39 yrs.	10 yrs.	Master's	VP	Middle
<b>P12</b>	40-49 yrs.	2 yrs.	Master's	VP	Working

*Note.* P1 = Participant#; Yrs. = years; VP = Vice President; SVP = Senior Vice President; Exec VP = Executive Vice President; Board = Board Member; CEO = Chief Executive Officer; socio-economic status pertains to the type of social-economic class as listed in Table 2.

Most prevalent among the demographics of participants was the socioeconomic status during childhood as identified by participants (i.e. majority identified as middle class at 67%) and most participants (92%) had some form of a college degree with most of those degrees being a Master's (75%). There were additional insights considering their demographics with the remainder of the interview, as described in the following RQ1 and RQ2 sections.

RQ1		RQ2	
Name	Files	References	
Authenticity	5	8	Authenticity
Stay True To Self-Values	5	8	Be True to Self-Values
Education	10	20	Education
Building Capabilites-Confiden	4	5	Building Confidence, Compet
Having the Piece of Paper	10	15	First Born
Family	12	19	Family
Circumstances	11	18	Circumstances
First Born	1	1	Encouragement-Expectation
Leadership and Development	12	56	Leadership and Development
Exposure-Opportunities	10	20	Mentorship-Models
Mentorship-Models	9	12	Networking
Networking	8	8	The Role-The Game
The Role-The Game	10	16	Religion-Faith
Religion-Faith	4	4	Beliefs
Beliefs	3	3	Gifts
Gifts	1	1	

Figure 1. Hierarchy of themes for RQ1 and RQ2 via NVivo 12.

## RQ1

What decisions-making strategies do African American women use to attain senior-level management positions?

**Leadership/leadership development.** This theme was highly ranked by participants as the primary factor in their decision to pursue a senior-level position, as illustrated in Figure 1 for RQ1, with 56 references by all 12 participants. With the exclusion of education, there were four main sub-themes, under the heading of leadership/leadership development, which included: the role/the game, exposure and opportunities, mentors/role models, and networking.

**The role/the game.** There were 83% of the participants that I highlighted, although I am sure that all understood the role and the game, with 16 references. What participants deemed important to know about the role and the game appeared almost interchangeable. The game referred to those unwritten rules of being hired for a position and career advancement. Another way of looking at the game was as a political system, process, or movement within an organization that benefited some and not others.

Participants expressed that although diversity was important to many organizational and HR leaders, they also recognized that there was still more work to be done, which included the elements that were part of the game and impacted decision-making. Participants stated that they had to be more cognizant than their counterparts of self (e.g. appearance, etc.) and actions. P1 was clear about the lingering issue of non-diversity in organizations: “I’ve been in several meetings and I’m sitting there, and I see I’m the only...African-American woman around all...Caucasian, older males/people.” Participants shared other elements that hindered their decisioning as part of the game. Voice was one such element for P4: “...I may not have been American born and I don’t sound like I’m American born..., [but] I’ve lived in this country for much longer than

I've actually lived in the country of my birth". Hair was an element described by P10: I've worn my hair natural [and then] I made the decision to [dread]locks, ...but I think in that environment [of XY company], it was embraced. But in some other environments...that that isn't embraced...". To help counter non-diversity, participants talked about the importance of "branding" and "visibility" (P11) and making "yourself relevant" (P1) in meetings and the organization.

Participants also acknowledged that they played an important role as a senior-leader in helping to promote and advocate for diversity in the workplace. P10 shared a story about the impact of diversity on her decision to be an advocate for diversity in the workplace: "...there are often times when we have publications that are produced with pictures of girls or videos and things of that nature, and I don't see the diversity. And so, I have spoken up and advocated that I need to see more diversity." What I appreciated about her story, which was shared by P10, was that too often diversity means the inclusion of one person of color. She advocated for equal representation of girls of color in those pictures and an equal mix within the group picture.

**Exposure/opportunities.** This sub-theme received 20 references from 83% of highlighted participants. The demographical information of participants played a role in having the exposure and opportunities. They considered volunteerism, having formed a professional brand or reputation of excellence, and a willingness to take risks as key to having the exposure and opportunities towards leadership development.

Participants expressed that they had opportunities to develop their leadership capabilities at an early age and throughout their lifespan that shaped their decisioning, as

indicated by P10: “And so, some...early on leadership opportunities were as a child...high school coordinating and taking on leadership roles in clubs and...after college while working in non-profit management...”. This exposure was also open to those who had a lower socio-economic status as a child, as with P2: “I grew up in [a particular state] where a lot of people did not go to college. However, [a particular organization] tend to encourage...African America teachers to go to those areas where they had low high school graduating rates and college and things and that nature, so the teachers did a phenomenal job with making sure that we were exposed.” Some participants mentioned having the good fortune of being tapped for leadership roles because of having built a reputation of excellence, and those opportunities helped to enhance their knowledge and skills towards career advancement decisioning. P2 was one such person with great success due to her brand: “...the organization that I work for now, I’ve had eight roles and I’ve never had to seek one of them.”. There are, at times, a certain level of risk to gain that exposure or opportunity to develop as leaders, as stated by P5: “Be willing to take on stretch assignments to expand your knowledge base and demonstrate new skill sets.” Each participant has had to make the decision about taking that risk and expressed not just willing to accept opportunities but mistakes, as expressed later in the *Results* section.

**Mentors/role models.** The mentors and role models experienced by each of the participants were different during childhood and adulthood, but each mentor and role model served as initiators of participants’ decisions to become leaders. I am sure that

each participant had a mentor or role model of some form during the lifespan, but 75% of the participants were highlighted with 12 references.

As stated in the *Demographical Insights* section within Chapter 4, the socio-economic status of participants played a role in the varying degree of mentor and role model availability and accessibility within and external to family. P4, for example, came from an influential family: “I would say that a lot of my life experiences had to do with the fact that the family had the examples and the role models that were provided to me, that I was exposed to...”. On the other hand, P5, for example, expressed the lack of such influence during childhood: “Growing up, I didn’t have role models such as doctors and lawyers living in my neighborhood, ...”. The participants, such as P5, were either fortunate to have school teachers or someone outside of the family as role models or had no exposure until college or working at an organization. Regardless of the socio-economic status of participants, they agreed to the lack of senior-level African American women role models and mentors, as expressed by P7, which may have marginalized or prevented their ability to envision being a senior-level leader: “...traditionally African-Americans didn’t hold those types of roles. ...we didn’t know that they were possible or that we could.” Because of the impact to envision a senior-level position, some participants did not initially decide to pursue a senior-level role.

**Networking.** Networking took many forms for 67% of the participants as expressed in eight references. A personal or professional network typically serve as the catalyst for higher senior-level roles and leadership development through connectivity to leaders of influence and peers. P10, for example, was one of those participants who



provided a positive response when talking about networking: “I think networking and relationship building... helped to provide guidance.” P3 was similarly positive: “I think [with] the more people that I met, ...that creates a network of other women because you have those similar life experiences, some similar life narratives to share and so you start networking not only for a job but in your community, with your church, with your child’s school and you just create a network.” P5 stated: “...this is another great way to gain exposure so that when opportunities become available, you are considered.” Although participants acknowledged the importance of networking, there were also missed opportunities in taking advantage of those connections in furtherance of their career, as expressed by P7: “I’ve been told on a multitude of occasions that my connections are wide and vast, but I don’t do a very good job personally in taking advantage of those relationships. Part of it for me is that I didn’t want to feel like I was asking for something or begging for something. I wanted to earn it, and the only way that I could earn it was to demonstrate that I could do it.” The feelings of begging and wanting to earn their place as a leader is also an example of a perception for African American women not easily averted, as described later in the *Results* section.

There were other perspectives about networking. One such perspective was common among participants. P12 stated: “It’s not really what you know or how you perform, but it was kind of an environment that was relationship driven. So, relations...kind of open[ed] the door for a lot of promotions...” There was also some naiveté on the part of some participants and a sense of unfairness with performance versus networking, as expressed by P6: “When I first started in my career,...I believed

that if I put my head down and do the best job possible that somebody was going to notice that. So, when it came to things like going out for office after hours or just having relationships at work that went to that next level, I just didn't put a lot of energy into that. I just felt that like I'm here, I'm doing everything that is expected of me, I am going above and beyond, so you should notice that and reward that. But then I realized that to get to that next level, as someone told me, you have to shake hands and kiss some babies..." In some sense, participants deemed networking as part of "playing the game". I think this also links back to what P7 described as not wanting to feel as though she was begging but wanting to earn her place as a leader.

**Family.** The focus of their stories was of the various family circumstances and ability to persevere due to or despite their circumstances. When talking about family, participants shared stories of family examples/role models and expectations, as well as family dynamics and hardships that shaped their decision-making. All participants (100%) spoke of family with 18 references. One reference was in regard to the participant being the oldest/first born in the family as being impactful.

As described in the *Demographical Insights* section of this paper, socio-economic status was key to participants' decision-making strategies. For example, P4 talked about family expectations: "I have aunts and uncles who are business people in leadership, CEO positions. So that's what I grew up seeing, and those were the expectations that was also expected for me." P6 stated, "So growing up, my cousins...had pretty good positions, and I looked up to them and I wanted to be a business executive one day." Participants, such as P5, talked about "coming from a working class/poor family" and

their socio-economic status as what influenced their decision-making strategies and “inspiration to change the trajectory of (their lives) and...children...” and P7, who also talked about her “... family’s socio-economic standards and also probably their values around education...that [she] would be able to achieve or succeed further than what [her] parents did.” P8 attributed a few elements that influenced her decision-making: “I would say in terms of life experiences, what drove me was the community that I was raised, my family’s economic status, and my family’s history in term of pursuing education.”

Some of these women became mothers prior to starting or early in their careers, which may have hindered or delayed their pursuit of a senior-level position. P9 spoke about “dragging [her] feet along” until her daughter became a senior in high school. P6 talked about when she started a family that having a baby “does create some obstacles” when pursuing a career as your decisions must reflect what is best for your family/child. P3 spoke of a similar situation but of being “a traditional woman and having a divorce, [and] becoming a single mom.” P11 was also a single mom and talked about her decisions to not pursue many positions because “...to interview for that required extensive travel or that would have required (her) to relocate.” In consideration of differing family circumstances, some decisions were not necessarily by choice but as a necessity.

**Education.** When applying for a position at an organization, the typical job description contains the hiring criteria. Part of the criteria is the level of required education required for the position. All participants acknowledged the importance of education in some form. When participants spoke about their experiences with education,

there was passion in their voices because of what having a degree would mean for them and their families. The highlights about education came from 83% of the participants with 15 references about the sub-theme of having the piece of paper. The lesser sub-theme came from 33% of participants with 5 references to building capabilities-confidence.

**Having the piece of paper.** The decision to obtain a degree, or the piece of paper, was important to participants personally and professionally. For example, P6 talked about her experience growing up and how her "...goal was to always either become a professional or go a level above [her] family members and...friends" by obtaining her degree. Socio-economic status played a role, as stated by P5: "if you work hard and pursue an education, whether it's college or whatever the case may be, you have the opportunity to change your circumstances." This sentiment was similarly expressed by P7, who talked about obtaining a degree to "be able to achieve or succeed further than what [her] parents did", and P8, who talked about how she "was a girl that knew that [she] wanted more for (herself) and...children, so [she] knew that [she] had to pursue education to be able to do better...." Adulthood could also be difficult financially when being a single mother, so P11 set the goal of getting her "Master's, hoping that [she] could secure a higher level of income", as well as certifications. P1 realized the limitations of career advancement due to being in an organization "without having an education." Once she set a goal and obtained her degree, she "kept moving up in my career." A single promise was made a present by P4 in obtaining her Ph.D., which made me smile: "My decision to do my Ph.D. was basically a Christmas present to my daddy."

**Building capabilities-confidence.** Beyond gaining a piece of paper, a degree provided participants with the confidence and capabilities to enable the decision for pursuing a senior-level role. “Once I got my Bachelor’s and Master’s that showed me that I had the capabilities of moving up”, as stated by P1. When I asked P10 about her decision that made a positive impact on pursuing a senior-level position, her response was one of confidence: “Of course, furthering my education was important, and believe that led to it.” There was also a confidence expressed by P 8: “I knew that this decision to go to college was really going to prepare me for whatever career goals that I had....” People travel long distances to obtain the knowledge and skills necessary towards a specified career, as P6 did, which illustrates the importance of the participants’ decisions to participate in their selected degree program. Although the sub-theme of Building Capabilities-Confidence could would be a candidate for RQ2 instead of RQ1, I wanted to be sure to not miss the opportunity in capturing these experiences as expressed by participants.

**Other themes.** Other themes that deserved to be acknowledged were authenticity and religion/faith. As many of the conversations progressed, participants spoke about the inclusion of their faith and ethics or values when deciding on an organization and career path. There were 42% of the participants with eight highlighted references regarding authenticity and 33% of the participants with four highlighted references regarding religion/faith. I appreciated the way P11 approached both authenticity and faith when talking about her decision-making and how those decisions manifested: “So, because of my ethical standards, that’s often times been a challenge in a lot of places because I’m

not a go-along-to-get-along kind of person. I am fair. A fairness and do-the-right-thing kind of person, and I believe that's why God has allowed me to stay in this position because it's necessary that there are some people like me that still have backbone to do that. But it has cost me a lot of situations whereby my own influence was minimized...."

What I appreciated about her experience, as with many experiences of the other participants, was that she stayed true to her values to perform her role ethically and in the best interest of the employees and organization. Her statement could also be reminiscent of the results for not playing the political game and recognized as a lesson learned or something to be aware of when pursuing a senior-level position.

## **RQ2**

How have facets of SCCT (e.g. self efficacy beliefs, outcome expectations, and personal goals) impacted the decision-making processes of African American women for career advancement?

**Leadership/leadership development.** As with RQ1, elements of leadership and leadership development were pertinent to the participants' decision-making but from an SCCT perspective. As described in the literature review, the intent of SCCT was to address content and process facets, or the what and how of career development and behaviors across one's life span (Lent & Brown, 2013; Lim et al., 2016). All participants provided highlights towards this theme, which totaled 85 references. The sub-themes identified were: participation/the game, networking, and mentorship/role models.

**Participation/the game.** This sub-theme evolved as all participants responded with 56 references. The most important reference, in terms of participation in pursuing a

senior-leadership role, would have to the question that all participants appeared to have asked themselves, as represented by P1: "... what do I need to do to get to (a senior-level position or) the next senior-level position?" She also talked about how people also had to realize that "they have to put in some work and they have to figure out and determine what that work is" to make a successful transition in a senior-level position and the importance of understanding how to "position yourself to do that." A similar perspective was by P2, who said, "...I always wanted to understand what were the objectives to be the best...[and that] when you seek after excellence, then it's easy for you to pursue senior roles." What I would like to make note of at this point was the appreciation that participants shared about this study and how the results may assist not just other African American women (as well as other women and minorities) but organizational and HR leaders, as expressed by P4: "...we tend to talk about all of these aspects of diversity but very rarely do I hear us talking about African American women and leadership and really getting down to the nuts and bolts of what does it really take." The experiences of each participant helped to gain insight on how they responded to events and what decisions were made for career advancement and in pursuit of a senior-level position.

Some participants recognized their leadership capabilities at an early age. As a representation of being self-aware at a young age, I must highlight the statement by P10: "...I, early on, saw that I had leadership skills and saw that I could influence people in a positive direction, and that I was a team player, and I was the one to always gather people." With recognizing these abilities at an early age, I sensed a level of confidence

from participants such as P10 and how their cognitive abilities helped shape their career decisioning towards a leadership role.

For other participants, opportunities to realize the potential of leadership or develop leadership skills did not happen until after secondary schooling. P7 was clear about this point: "...probably until I got to my 20's or in college or even beyond college to know that people of color could have a senior leadership role or that there was even such a thing as a C-suite because it just didn't exist in my world as a child growing up." P3 similarly acknowledged that "there aren't that many of us [African American women]" in senior-level positions. With the limitation of experiencing representation in top positions at an early age, there was little to no expectation of obtaining a senior level position or setting personal goals in the realm of leadership until adulthood. Regardless of whether participants started their path at an early or later age, they still had to contend with the game.

One constant that participants discussed throughout the interview was about the game, which appeared to impact their self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and personal goals. The expectation on acquiring a senior-leadership role as well as elements of the game, as expressed by P1, was about having "a mindset that you want this position, and you gotta do the things that would help you to get there." P2 admitted that her "philosophy [was that] there's a cost to get to the next level." Some participants, such as P11, acknowledged not wanting to be a participant in the game but realized that if they wanted to advance in their careers "...at the end of the day, you are going (to) play the game." In addition to equality, the perception was the need for fairness. P1



acknowledged, “We [African American women] have to do the work. It cannot be handed to us”, but also stated that “for us, it takes double, of course, what it takes our White counterparts have to do to get that position.” P11 similarly stated that the rules for African Americans, particularly the women, were “...not the same, and you would be kidding yourself if you think they are.” For example, many participants talked about the importance of speaking up but also to be careful of being “...labeled as...that aggressive Black woman...[and] learning how to say it”, as stated by P10. Beyond knowing professional etiquette of speaking, participants also talked about the importance of confidence and communicating your career aspirations.

Participants spoke about the importance of confidence in career decision-making, as a lack of confidence can impact self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and personal goals. I had to take note of what P1 said with regards to how African American women make decision “in some cases, we are our own worst enemy”, which appeared to mean that we tend to get in our own way of achievement or success. The words by P2 was about this hinderance by saying, “I think a lot of time we are not intentional about our careers. And when I say intentional, don’t be afraid to communicate what you want and have confidence that you can go far.” P1 stressed that African American women must be intentional in not just telling what they want, but also having “those conversations with their manager to find out what are their expectations for you to move into that next role...[as] a lot of times we don’t even ask; and if they don’t tell you, then you don’t know.” P12 talked about her one regret in not having confidence or not being “bold or courageous enough to say *yes*” when asked to “to go into a management role” because

she “didn’t think [she] was ready.” As P12 talked more about her one regret, she stated that she later recognized that she had the competencies and was better skilled than the person who accepted the role. In addition to having inner confidence, you also have to exude confidence “to give people the confidence that you know what you’re doing ... You have to know enough to be dangerous, and you have to be confident when you’re delivering the message.” Knowing enough to be dangerous can also be construed as being part of the game.

The game is not always negative in that there are standards that people have to uphold to be in the game. The issue, as described by participants, is the dark side of the game where standard expectations, when pursuing a higher-level role, have negative connotations for a particular group or individual. For example, P1 expressed some standard expectations: “If you want to be at a senior VP level, you gotta come in there and, again, dressing, talking, exuding that you’re already in that role.” One point of frustration was about dress by P1: “I’ve seen in my years where African-American women will unfortunately, in some cases, where they will not dress the part....” Again, an illustration of how people can be their own worst enemy. In conjunction with the standard expectations, there was the perception that “we (African American women) are always going to be judged at a higher standard”, as emphasized by P11. This perception persists because many of these women, as expressed by P12, felt that a lot of the high-level or high paying roles were “for the most part...pretty well dominated, and...little bit racial, but [maybe] more than anything there’s gender in that way vs. racial.” When referring to speech, P11 talked about how “your voice is judged even more than your skin

tone because immediately when you start talking, people make a judgement call.” In an RQ1 response, as provided by P10, she talked about the decision that many African American women consider with regards to hair because of the perception of the acceptance or non-acceptance within the work environment: “... in that environment, it was embraced. But in some other environments, ...that isn’t embraced, and so that may have been the reason why I didn’t pursue that.” Racial and gender biases are the dark side of the game to still be reconciled and resolved as diversity and inclusion strategies better evolve.

*Networking.* Some participants talked about networking as part of the game, but there were also aspects of great benefit towards self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and personal goals of the participants. I focused on eight participants with 17 references regarding networking. The importance of networking is building relationships. The premise behind building relationships is being able to “reach out of (one’s) comfort zone and...[build] relationships across cultures, and not only building relationships with people of color or African American professional[s] but building relationships outside of that” and “internally within your organization as well as externally”, as expressed by P10. P2 expressed being fortunate and similarly talked about the importance of having “a strong network of diversified individuals ...those advocates [who are] internal and external...[who] you can confide with...[and] can help you in order to help to move forward.” Another way of thinking about one’s network is as “...a cycle of influencers”, as described by P6. P12 talked about networking in terms of “...people you can call and...just to talk about strategies and the latest trends and that kind of thing”, which the

other 58% of participants also echoed. There was a statistic shared about networking from P7 to emphasize the importance of networking: “I read an article, and I don’t know where it was, but it was like 80% of the people hired are hired because of relationships that they have.” While there are opportunities to build relationships with organizational influencers, there is still a side of networking that is part of the game.

When talking in terms of the game, the perception of networking is one of career advancement advantage not fully realized by African American women and susceptible to unfair advantages. P11 described this phenomenon: “It’s who you know. It really is, and so that’s another misnomer that you have *oh, if I get all this education and I have all this experience, they are going to hire me*. No, no. They might have somebody way less qualified than you and pay them more money. It’s just all about who you know. So, I think understanding that game, understanding those components, understanding how vital that is for your success, I would have done that a lot differently and quicker.” What I heard from participants was about the lack of time or not knowing how to network and focusing on getting the credentials and working hard, long hours to prove one’s self. Again, I reiterate how sometimes people can be their own worst enemy because, as stated by P7: “We’ve not got there. We still fight the hard fight. Even once we got there, we’re still in the battle.” In addition to learning how to take advantage of networking, there is also the advantages of having a mentor or role model.

***Mentorship/Role Models.*** An equal number of participants (eight) provided 12 references related to this sub-theme. In addition to personal and professional networks, mentors and role models play a significant part in an individual’s career decisions and

development of self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and personal goals. They served as people throughout one's lifespan, as described by P9, as people who "really carried [them] through and got [them] to where [they are] now." These mentors or role models typically connect in the form of family, friends, teachers, peers, and leaders.

Unlike one's network, having a large number of mentors is not necessary. As expressed by these participants, but particularly P4, there is importance in "...find[ing] mentors, whether they be male or female mentors. They don't have to look like you, but at least these mentors have the commitment to guide you, to walk with you, to be honest with you, to tell you when you are making mistakes, but also to be a cheerleader and that could be one good person." A lesson that P6 shared, when selecting a mentor, was to "...find someone, strategic within the organization, that is truly interested in having women/African American women advance in the company." P12 promoted an additional consideration: "...to find an executive sponsor. If you can. And that's really beyond a mentor. So, a sponsor is really someone ideally that's really looking out for you and able to really promote you to others at the table and really encourage you take those stretch assignments."

As some of these women described not having a mentor or role model during childhood or early adulthood, they expressed importance as senior-level African American women of becoming a mentor for other African American women (as well as other women and minorities). To emphasize this point, P10 stated, "the importance of us, as African American women, mentoring other women of color and helping to bring them along, showing encouragement and support...because often times, even if we're working

within an organization, we may not get that support from some of our other colleagues; so, we need to be a big cheerleader for each other.” P4 talked about how “...a large part of [her] role as a senior leader really [was] around growing that talent – growing the next generation of [African American women].” This importance of becoming a mentor is not only to provide “good advice, ...feedback on what you need to do, [and] personal development”, as described by P6, but also in how to navigate the game. One perception to note was expressed by P1 regarding mentorship: “...African-American females, young females...don’t understand the power of mentoring, and asking for assistance or asking for that coach/person to coach them in the right direction and heeding to what that person says.” P1 also qualified her response with an experience of frustration with being asked to be a mentor, providing advice on actions to take, and then the person not following through or failing to reconnect after the conversation. This type of experience, if deemed continuous, could have a mentor expect non-participation as a response and no longer elect to mentor as a future goal. As I have said many times throughout Chapter 4, sometimes individuals are their own worst enemies.

**Family.** At the heart of where individuals developed their perception of the world and how individuals make decisions includes the concern for family. Although family ranked behind leadership/leadership development as a theme, there was the same number of participants (100%) who contributed to this theme with 32 references. The two sub-themes that resulted with the highest number of participants and references were circumstances and encouragement/expectation. The other sub-theme that was a minor highlight but impactful was first born.

**Circumstances.** This sub-theme received 21 references from 83% of the participants. Each participant talked about their experiences in terms of various circumstances and their self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and personal goals in relation to their decisions. These participants, such as P9, talked about circumstances as “...bumpy roads trying to get through things and not making much money or anything, struggling financially, and things like that...” in describing their experiences at some point during their lifespan.

Participants reflected on how they grew up and acknowledged how, as stated by P6: “...really growing up in that environment shapes you”, as well as how “a lot of people will look at what their family members have done, and they will follow that path because that’s all they know”, as expressed by P6. Although some participants may not have had mentors or role models during childhood, they recognized their abilities during or beyond childhood. These abilities heightened their self-efficacy and enabled participants to image their careers and develop personal goals to achieve the careers imagined. For example, P8 talked about the development of her career path: “...early on I realized that I kind of have a natural skill to help problem solve or to make things happen, so that life experience was one that I think really contributed to where I am today.” On the other hand, P7 stated, “...because I had the pleasure of working for Fortune 500 companies and companies that were beyond the U.S., I got to see experiences that I know I never had as a child”, which helped to shape her view of the world and her perceived ability to succeed. This sentiment was echoed by P3, who lacked mentors and roles models until she “got out into the world and...saw other women.” She, as similar

participants, realized a paradigm shift in her potential to excel as an African American woman in a career by “meeting other women who (were in) corporate leadership, leading kind of women.”

Although participants recognized their abilities and established a high-level of self-efficacy, there were still circumstances that may have hindered or slowed their progress towards an expected career outcome and personal career goals. These circumstances included family illness, young children, or money matters. The participant that exemplified such circumstances was P11, who said, “I had my situations before of bringing up a young one, taking care of mom, and taking care of it all, I didn’t have time to network. I basically just left time enough to sleep. So, now that I can kind of start evolving into myself and doing those kinds of things, I’ve found it to be a lot more helpful.” She also talked about how with having time to better engage in her career, she “...feel(s) better, ...more empowered, aligned and understood because [she] know[s] what’s happening out there and what people are doing and why.” P1 talked about pay and family being a determinant factor in her decisioning-making: “...decisions that I did have to make was not going to (XYZ company) initially when I first left (ABC Company) because they weren’t paying enough at the time...So, I still don’t know if I would have went...during that time period because it was a family thing more so.” Regardless of the family circumstances, participants also talked about encouragement and a level of expectations.

**Encouragement/Expectations.** Although not as significant as the Circumstances sub-theme, this sub-theme was worth noting. There were nine references from 50% of the



participants. The reason this theme was worth noting was because of the stories of inspiration. For example, I spent a little more time with P9 on this point because her story had humor and reflected the support and honesty sometimes needed. Her story entailed a husband that provided her with words of encouragement to begin her path to become a senior-level leader: “My husband used to always to tell me *don't be stupid, be smart*. And he used to say it all the time, and it used to upset me cause I knew what he meant... I think he was saying don't just stop where you are and don't grow. Keep growing. Cause I was a home-body, I didn't go anywhere, I raised my daughter...And he said *you can't stay in this house all the time – you have to get out of here and meet people...* So, that's what got me out of the house.” Sometimes words of encouragement from childhood makes such an impact to decision-making that self-imposed expectations and personal goals become relevant to the next generation as a benefit, specifically towards a career path. For example, P1 stated, “I think that the childhood of my parents just saying you can do things. I got this mindset that I spilled over to my child...” and P7 said, “...my child needed it in order for him to succeed especially as a Black male.”

***First Born.*** I highlighted first born as a sub-theme as there was some representation of participants who described this position within the family as the start of their leadership development and decision to pursue. Although I only highlighted two references, they were the more significant. P12 summed up the feeling of being the first born: “I think just being the oldest child, I've always been, I hate to say, kind of a leader... So, most people would probably see me as a leader vs. a follower....” The words

of P12 exemplified that of the other participants who talked about being the first born of the family.

**Education.** Standard schooling, college, and training, whether through a cooperative program or workplace training, provided participants with the formal knowledge and skills necessary to build the competencies necessary to pursue a senior-level position. With family (and environment) as the first level of developing perceptions of the world and decision-making, the next level begins at time of entering school. This next level was instrumental in what evolved into participants' developing the confidence, required competencies, and knowledge to pursue a senior-level position within an organization. I considered having two separate themes for RQ2 as I did with RQ1 but having the piece of paper was described as part of building the confidence to succeed. All participants (100%) provided responses that resulted in a total of 20 references, as education was an important component of their lives and successes.

Education has many forms and more than in the formal sense of a classroom because you must "...be willing and open to learn from everyone", as stated by P5. When I think about education, I think about the amount of influence that organizational and HR leaders hold and can help facilitate the required learning for employees to pursue and achieve a senior-level position. This help could be internally (e.g. in-house training) to the organization and externally (via vendors and tuition reimbursement benefit). Participants described a link between education and confidence, as P10 asserted by stating, "...it definitely helps in confidence..." and to "...get the advanced degree, or certification, or training, or whatever is needed, and always be a life-long learner. So,

whenever possible and in whatever we do, and in some aspects of it, we want to become an expert at it.”

With many of the participants having graduate degree, I wanted to capture examples of their perceptions about the significance of having these higher-level degrees, in terms of confidence, competence, and knowledge to pursue and achieve a senior-level position. P6, for example, talked about higher education being important to career advancement by stating, “Definitely, a Master’s degree – what they teach is not just to be a manager anymore, but also to be senior-level manager...” and “[Education] also teaches you about different spheres of influence...– who makes the decisions, and do I have access to the person that makes that decision? If I don’t, do I have a relationship with somebody who has a relationship with the key decision makers? So, really understanding that circle of influence...” P8 described education in terms building decision-making capabilities by stating, “I think it’s because of my education that I was able to get good insight into my career choices and my area (of) expertise that I wanted to focus on. The whole educational piece gives you exposure, it gives you insight, and it allows you an opportunity to weigh the pros and cons of the areas of what you think you would like to build into.” Through acquired knowledge and experiences to build into a leadership role, participants gained the confidence and competencies necessary to successfully pursue a senior-level position and navigate some of the extremities of the game.

**Authenticity.** This theme, for participants, was about being true to self and values. This sentiment was clearly stated by P2, who said, “Don’t compromise your

ethics, your beliefs, or anything that you will regret over the years.” The theme of authenticity received a total of 19 references from 83% of the participants.

Participants spoke with and about passion and being authentic in pursuing career advancement. For example, P6 described, “I kind of saw that if you want to succeed, sometimes you have to be passionate about what you do and it’s not just about moving to that next level.” P8 provided advice about passion around career choice by stating, “Make sure that they are passionate about the career choices that they make. It’s nothing worse than working in a job that you hate for 30 years looking towards retirement”. Another example was, “There’s always going to be challenges, and the grass isn’t always greener on the other side, but really choose to pursue your passion and make sure that it’s something that you’re called to do” (P10). One of the challenges that participants faced, although passionate and authentic, was the game.

There was a balance that participants had to be cognizant of while pursuing a senior-level position, which included their values versus the game. P11 talked about the game and not wanting to be a participant but understood that the pursuit of a senior-level role was part of the game. She went on to then talk about how she was not deterred to be true to self by stating, “...but you’re going to play it in a way that’s going to be best played by yourself. I can’t be something that I’m not, but I do have to understand that there’s things that I got to do for my survival.” In wanting to play the game, participants named a gamut of methods to navigate the idiosyncrasies of the game inclusive of doing all that you can to be successful. P8 made this point by saying, “We [African American females] are conditioned to do what we have to do to make things happen for ourselves

and our loved ones.” One of the lessons learned by playing the game was to stay true to self, which P5 emphasized by saying, “Be your authentic self. You don’t have to be perfect. We will all make mistakes. If you made a mistake, say so openly and learn from it.” Some participants described being authentic as difficult at time but also talked about relying on their faith to persevere.

**Religion/faith.** This theme received 14 references from 50% of the participants. Although this theme was not ranked as high as the other themes, their experiences with regards to faith and their careers was important to mention. The sub-themes that resulted from interviews were beliefs (six participants and eight references) and gifts (four participants and 6 references), although one could argue that I could have combined the two sub-themes.

**Beliefs.** Participants spoke in terms of how belief in faith was key to their self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and personal goals in career decision-making. P8 was most clear on this point by saying, “I would be remised if I did not mention my faith because my career decisions have all been driven not by just my personal desires but my desire to be within God’s will. So, my faith along with my desire to be successful and to be used to help people all work hand-in-hand.” Similar to staying authentic, there’s a balance inclusive of faith that participants talked about as well. For example, P7 stated, “I think there’s a professional life, I think there’s a personal life, and I think there’s a spiritual life. In leaning more on my spiritual life and finding that balance and knowing that as much in control as I think I am, some of this stuff is already predetermined whether I want to believe it or not.” Part of that balance is having the patience for your

goals to come to fruition, as stated by P10, who said, “Sometimes, we want things wrapped firmer than God may feel that we’re ready for, and so don’t get discouraged because of a timing we may have on our goals...”

*Gifts.* Gifts, as described by participants, had to do with born abilities derived from some higher power. On this point, P8 stated, “...you have to know your natural skills. You can be taught a lot of things, but everybody has been born with gifts.” She went on to talk about gifts with a level of certainty that I cannot put into words, and connected those gifts to her ability to succeed by stating, “And if you can operate in your natural skills set/your natural gift, then it’s going to enhance your ability to be successful in what you do because when you love what you do, especially if you’re working in a senior-level position.” Some participants realized their gift by some life event, as with P11, who said, “But then I realized that’s my God given ability because people connect with me and they feel comfortable with me.” When people are unsure as to their gifts or natural abilities, P10 recommended taking part in the “personality assessments that are out there, whether it’s Myers Briggs or DiSC or things of that nature...to know where [the person is] strong at, where [a person’s] gifts are.” Faith appeared to be a strong influence for these ladies, but also talked about the potential for a struggle in balancing “...professional life, ...personal life, and ...spiritual life” (P7). P7 talked about how an individual could not let the struggle be strong enough “...to lose the gift that God gave...for a profession.” One could also say that this statement by P7 illustrated that she was being true to self or being authentic.

## Summary

The research results reported in this chapter reflects the analysis of perspectives from 12 African American women in senior-level positions. Through this qualitative phenomenological study, participants were provided an opportunity to share their lived experiences regarding their career decision-making strategies and the influence and build of their self-efficacy beliefs, outcome expectations, and personal goals. The data analysis plan consisted of accurately interpreting the data by gathering and organizing the content and identifying patterns and themes to report a holistic depiction or meaning of the lived experiences of senior-level African American women. After I organized the content in NVivo 12 by coding text within each transcript in alignment to the appropriate research question, five main themes were identified.

This study consisted of two overarching research questions. RQ1 provided insight into participants' perceptions about their decisions-making strategies used to obtain to attain senior-level management positions. RQ 2 provided insight into participants' perception about how the facets of social cognitive career theory (SCCT) (e.g. self-efficacy beliefs, outcome expectations, and personal goals) impacted their decision-making process. These research questions produced five main themes from participants' responses, which included: leadership/leadership development, family, education, authenticity, and religion/faith. The sub-themes for each research question were almost identical, but there were some minor differences (refer to Figure 1). For RQ1, the resulting sub-themes totaled 11. The resulting sub-themes for RQ2 totaled 10. The

interviews revealed the hearts and minds of participants and their world view throughout their lifespan in the ultimate pursuit a senior-level position.

The results of this study may provide information that organizational and HR leaders can utilize to reflect on and reconsider the effectiveness of their policies, programs, and strategies on recruitment, talent management, diversity and inclusion policies and programs, and succession planning, specific to African American women. Providing a textual context versus a numerical data may provide that additional insight necessary to facilitate this reflection and consideration of strategies. To conclude this dissertation, Chapter 5 includes an introduction to the chapter, interpretation of the findings, limitations of the study, recommendations, and implications of the study.



## Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

### **Introduction**

Workplace diversity is an important topic in the field of management and exploring new ways to expand the mindset of those responsible for workplace diversity may prompt an evolution in workplace strategies. Minority women, specifically African-American women, have a long history of experiencing inadequate representation in senior-level positions. The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to understand the lived experiences regarding career advancement decision-making strategies for senior-level African American women through a SCCT lens. Through exploration of these strategies, the results may provide an opportunity for organizational and HR leaders to review and reconsider the effectiveness of their policies, programs, and strategies for potential improvements. With potential improvements, there may be an opportunity to enhance the career advancement experiences of African American women, thus increasing the organizational high potential candidate pool to address the lack of diversity in senior-level positions and enhance organizational capabilities towards sustaining a competitive advantage and living up to the organizations' promise of corporate social responsibility.

Although there have been discussions on the issue of underrepresentation or lack of diversity in organizations over the years, there is still a gap in the literature. This study digs deeper to uncover how and why African American women were able to achieve senior-level positions to answer the two central research questions. By using snowball sampling, I was able to connect with 12 current and past senior-level African American

women to participate in the study and share their lived experiences regarding their decision-making strategies and facets of SCCT (self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and personal goals). Chapter 5 focuses on several elements to conclude this study, which includes interpretation of the findings, limitations of the study, recommendations, implications of the study, and summary.

### **Interpretation of the Findings**

Analysis of the data enabled an opportunity to identify themes from participants' experiences in preparation of making an interpretation of the data. Performing an interpretation helps to bring "clarity to the meaning of the analysis" (Miles et al., 2014, p. 321). NVivo 12 was the qualitative tool used to house the transcripts from the interviews and helped with coding. Coding, highlighting, and tagging helped to align specific statements within the responses of the applicable central research question. To ensure the quality of the interpretation, I referred not just to the coding but also to transcripts, resumes, and field notes for context. From the interview responses offered by the participants, there were five overarching themes for the central research questions: leadership/leadership development, family, education, authenticity, and religion/faith.

#### **Finding 1: Lack of Diversity**

The challenges of duality faced by African American women wanting to pursue a senior-level position still exist in the year 2018. A perception of participants was that organizational and HR leaders recognized the importance of diversity, but there was still more work to be done to increase diversity within the upper echelons of the organization. Participants also talked about having put forth great effort to obtain the requisite

experience and educational background (especially graduate degrees) to achieve a senior-level position. Although participants put forth great effort towards securing senior-level positions, they perceived that this type of effort by African American women did not, as expected, equate to equal opportunities within the upper echelons of an organization. This perception was consistent with the literature that described the lack of promoting a supportive environment that was conducive to leadership development and career advancement opportunities for accomplished African American women (Davis & Maldonado, 2015). Because of participants' predisposal to societal or cultural norms pertaining to gender and race, they were able to envision an outcome of their efforts and establish personal goals to overcome the associated challenges in pursuing a senior-level position.

### **Finding 2: Perceptions of Unfairness**

Participants described the issue of duality in terms of their career path towards becoming a senior-level leader. They perceived that they had to produce more effort in terms of work performance and gain more education and certifications to illustrate superior competencies compared to their counterparts. This sentiment was consistent with African American women compensating for their duality by deciding to overcome the challenges of duality characteristics, such as skin tone, voice, and one's name at times, "by improving their observable skills or credentials" (Bertrand & Mullainathan, 2004, p. 1011).

Because of the perception of having to overcome their duality, participants perceived a level of unfairness in pursuing senior-level positions. With the lack of

diversity within organizations, the circumstances may produce contradictory measures for how organizational leaders evaluate men and women on their performance (Johns, 2013). The perception of unfairness had an impact on participants' level of self-efficacy in terms of doubting their ability and diminished some of their efforts and outcome expectations towards professional opportunities.

### **Finding 3: Formal and Informal Expectations**

The expectations of a leader role is more than the job/role description. The leaders within an organization also have expectations. African American women, specifically, must be cognizant of the expectations placed on them by organizational leaders because of their duality status as those expectations tend to be higher than the expectations placed on their counterparts (McNeely Cobham & Patton, 2015). Participants expressed this sentiment in many of the responses to interview questions. With diversity challenges to overcome, participants considered the realities of those challenges and the facets of SCCT (self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and personal goals) and decided on a path to pursue a specific career and higher-level position. With the decision to pursue, these women discovered the importance understanding leaders' expectations and had to be cognizant of their "branding" and "visibility" (P11). The participants also recognized the importance of making "[themselves] relevant" (P1) in meetings and the organization by giving "... people the confidence" (P12) in their abilities to counter non-diversity situations and attitudes pertaining to African American women and their leadership capabilities.

In connection with participants being able to counter non-diversity situations and attitudes was their ability to navigate the game, which included the need for these African American women to be cognizant of appearance and behaviors because of the potential for discrimination, prejudice, and biases. When attempting to make a contribution to a strategic conversation, these women had to be careful of not being labeled aggressive, as this type of characteristic is considered masculine from a traditional social and workplace perspective (Davis & Maldonado, 2015). There was also the acceptance and non-acceptance within the organizational culture of African American women's appearances (hair, voice, and skin tone). Such challenges created conflict in the participants' decision-making, actions, and motivation towards specific careers and pursuit of a senior-level position within some organizations (Buse et al., 2013; Duffy et al., 2013). To assist with their decision-making, particularly in times of conflict, a majority of the participants talked about reliance on their self-efficacy, being authentic, and their faith.

#### **Finding 4: Career Decision-Making**

With the five main themes in mind (leadership/leadership development, family, education, authenticity, and religion/faith), career-decision-making is an involved process. As expressed in Chapter , past performance and experience have an impact on the individual's level of career optimism which then impacts how and why an individual makes career decisions throughout an individual's lifespan (Garcia et al., 2015). As part of formulating career decision-making, individuals must consider their level of self-efficacy beliefs, outcome expectations, and personal goals towards successful

achievement of a senior-level position (Johns, 2013; Lent & Brown, 2013), which evolves over time.

Children's development of worldview initially comes from family and the environment in which they live. The childhood reality for some participants revealed exposure to role models and mentors in high-scale or senior-level positions, while others did not. As described by participants on the higher end of the socio-economic scale, they observed and experienced positive people within their families and external environment as role models and mentors to envision the possibility of becoming a senior-level leader (Gushue & Whitson, 2006). Societal portrayals (e.g. film and television) of African Americans, the observation of a majority of African Americans in lower level roles in the workforce, and observations of stereotyping and discrimination in the external environment stifled the possibility of considering a senior-level role for other participants (James, 2000). Where there was no representation or role model, observations and experiences, experiences beyond childhood produced a paradigm shift of how they viewed the world. For example, P7 stated that she did not have exposure to role models and mentors until after secondary school and into college, which probably delayed her envisioning and decision-making about the pursuit of a senior-level position within an organization. This is not to say that participants without a role model did not receive encouragement from family or the external environment (e.g. school, church, etc.) of the possibility of work achievement because they did receive such encouragement, but that there was a lack of exposure to role models and mentors with high-scale or senior-level positions.

**Finding 5: Work to Achieve a Higher-Level Role**

There are elements to becoming a senior-level leader that are strategic and, at times, unwritten and sometimes perceived as unfair. Participants expressed the importance of being cognizant of self, organizational culture, role of a leader, and management's expectations. With these elements in mind, the ensuing experiences (personal and professional) appeared to have complicated the decision-making process (Beckwith et al., 2016), which, at times, strengthened or lessened participants' self-efficacy beliefs, outcome expectations, and personal goals. Part of this complication, as expressed by participants, was understanding the ability to navigate aspects of pursuing leadership and the game.

The game referred to those unwritten rules of being hired for a position and career advancement. In Chapter 4, I mentioned that the perception of networking was one of career advancement advantages not fully realized by African American women and susceptible to unfair advantages. Similarly concluded in the literature was that African Americans, compared to Whites/Caucasians and other groups, are at a disadvantage in terms of professional networks or social capital (Smith, 2013). A potential rationale behind this lack of social capital for African American women was the challenge of building strong influential relationships outside of one's race as well as finding African American women (or other women and minorities) in senior-level positions with which to build such relationships (James, 2000). Several of the participants shared this sentiment as part of the difficulty in securing the social capital that their counterparts enjoyed. Participants gained an understanding about networking by way of higher education or as

a realization that great work effort did not always equate to advancement opportunities versus taking the time to build a strong network of influencers.

Opting for a mentor and becoming a mentor were two important components for participants. Participants talked about how mentors provided them with the guidance and confidence to navigate the political system (the game) of the organization, develop the most advantageous networking systems, and determine the appropriate path towards a senior-level position (Angel et al., 2013; Beckwith et al., 2016; EEOC, n.d.; Johns, 2013). The recommendation for finding a mentor, as described by P6, was to find "...someone, strategic within the organization, that is truly interested in having women/African American women advance in the company." An additional recommendation was to not focus on only African Americans as mentors but any leader of influence who would be the best fit and have the mentee's best interests at heart in pursuing a senior-level position. Understanding the limitation of finding such a mentor, whether learned during childhood or professional career, prompted the inclusion of becoming a mentor by participants, as with P4 who talked about the responsibility "...as a senior leader...[is] around growing that talent – growing the next generation of us [African American women]".

### **Finding 6: Career Delays**

Family circumstances (e.g. caregiving, financial, etc.) was a key driver of career decision-making. From a traditional perspective, for example, many of these women played a major role in caring for a new baby or young child, elderly or ill-stricken parent or significant other, or other person of importance (Johns, 2013). Because of the requisite



time and effort required of a caregiver, participants experienced limitations of their career decision-making and delays in their pursuit of career advancement.

There were times where self-efficacy beliefs faltered. The lack of confidence in one's ability was also a factor in career decision-making. Several of the participants expressed the lack of confidence when provided an opportunity to advance their careers, which appeared to be due to their subjective view of their ability to succeed rather than reliance of an objective view (e.g. performance appraisals, being offered to advanced, etc.) (Spurk & Abele, 2014). This view became more evident as participants talked about less experienced coworkers accepting the opportunities of advancement and regretting not having the confidence to decide differently and envision a positive outcome towards achieving the personal goal of senior leadership.

#### **Finding 7: Excitement About Future Possibilities**

Organizational and HR leaders and individuals, such as the participants of this study, agreed that there was still work to be done towards improving the diversity and inclusion of the organizational culture, talent pipeline, and candidates and recruitment for senior leadership specific to African American women, as well as other women and minorities. Despite the challenges and due to the opportunities and successes experienced by participants along their career path, participants were optimistic about the possibilities of the future in breaking the glass ceiling. With recognizing that the change in workplace and market demographics, organizational and HR leaders also recognized the importance of structuring the right strategies to capitalize on these demographic changes and diversity of knowledge, specifically at the leadership levels within the organization

(Davis & Maldonado, 2015). There are also newly created social networking venues, specific to African Americans and African American women. The importance of these network venues is to provide networking development and practice opportunities and build professional (and personal) relationships towards bridging the gap with peers and improving the likelihood of reaching the upper echelons of an organization (Davis & Maldonado, 2015). African American women have more higher-level degrees and professional experiences subscribed to them (Angel et al., 2013; BLS, 2015), and there is hope of greater recognition of these qualities towards leadership opportunities. There is also hope that as more African American women achieve a senior-level position that they will become mentors to other African American women, take on the responsibility of opening the door, and model the way.

### **Limitations of the Study**

The limitations of this qualitative study required certain parameters be established to ensure the trustworthiness of the study. The sampling strategy for this study was snowball sampling, which was a slow process but enabled me to locate the appropriate number of participants to achieve data saturation towards gaining meaningful insight into the phenomenon (Beckwith et al., 2016). The criteria established for participation in the study were that participants had to be African American women who currently serve or served in a senior-level leadership role (e.g. vice president and higher). After securing the participants for the study, my focus turned to the data gathering process.

The processes of data gathering and analysis took a long time to complete, but I took care to ensure the trustworthiness of the study. Upon completion of the interviews, I forwarded the transcriptions of the interviews to participants to confirm that I captured their experiences accurately (member checking). Triangulation of the data comprised of the interviews, field notes, member checking, and resumes with all information stored within NVivo 12 to assist with analysis. My experience with NVivo was of a novice user, which delayed my ability to expedite the analysis of the data and resulted in 15 days to complete the analysis. A few of those days were to practice the use of the tool, and the remainder of time was to ensure the accurate entry and categorization towards deriving at the appropriate themes. Although learning created additional delays in completing Chapter 4, as well as the securing of participants and transcription of the interviews, I focused on the requirements of trustworthiness by meeting the standard of quality.

### **Recommendations**

The results of the data analysis provided for the development of a few recommendations. The basis of these recommendations was from participants' lived experiences and meaning derived from their career decision-making with an SCCT lens. The intention of these recommendations was to provide organizational and HR leaders with a new path to elevate their recruitment, retention, talent management, diversity and inclusion policies and programs, and succession planning strategies inclusive of an African American woman focus.

**Recommendation One: Reimagine Youth Outreach Initiatives**

Although some participants within this study expressed having beaten the odds of achieving success in spite of their socio-economic status, there are still others who did not have such opportunities in life. The expectation or future vision of youth, specifically African American females, in lower socio-economic families is relatively low in terms of achieving a high-level role within an organization compared to those in better socio-economic standing (Schoon, 2006). As expressed by some participants, exposure to role models that looked like them and mentors in high-level positions were either minimal to non-existent.

The recommendation is to reimagine the organizational approach to engaging the community and early grade-level (e.g. fifth grade) of African American females. There are a multitude of programs to enhance the knowledge and capabilities of young people, as well as scholarships and grants by organizations, and increase the likelihood of higher academic achievement, development of leadership skills, becoming a contributing member of society, or other positive opportunities. Organizational and HR leaders may want to consider working with community agencies and leaders in combining their efforts and resources to facilitate a grander-scaled strategy of improving the leader exposure and experiences of economically disadvantaged African American females, which could improve or enhance their worldview and expectations of possible leader role achievement. This strategy should include a plan for ensuring that these young people have accurate information, the knowledge to facilitate efficient (career) decision-making capabilities, and opportunities to build leadership capabilities. By building these

capabilities, these young people may be able to evolve with a heightened sense of self-efficacy, ability to envision and expect achievement in gaining high-level roles, and opportunities to devise personal and professional goals towards achieving those roles (Fouad & Santana, 2017; Lent & Brown, 2013; Watts et al., 2015). With low numbers of African American women in STEAM occupations, for example, this reimagined concept could also help to increase the number of African American women in senior-level positions within those industries (Fouad & Santana, 2017). As this would be a long-term evolution and commitment, additional consideration may be to connect with the specified school system as well as engage the young person's family and establish a plan for the family to become active participants in the process.

### **Recommendation Two: Reimagine and Synergize Diversity and Inclusion Strategies**

For many years, organizational and HR leaders recognized the importance of diversity and inclusion in senior-level positions and devised programs, such as women leadership programs and African American affinity groups. They also recognized, as indicated in the literature and by participants, that there was still work to be done in this realm to be more inclusive of African American women. For example, the literature described the lack, by some organizational leaders, to promote a supportive environment that was conducive to leadership development and career advancement opportunities for accomplished (i.e. talented and educated) African American women (Davis & Maldonado, 2015). Mentors are most evident as potential supporters and there may be organizational leaders who are very supportive of their diversity and inclusion program

(Beckwith et al., 2016; Johns, 2013), but a sense of urgency is not apparent as the number of African American women in senior-level positions is still relatively low.

The recommendation is to create synergy, which refers to bringing the right people together to collaboratively create effective solutions to lingering problems (Covey, 1991), specifically the lack of African American women in the pipeline for senior-level leadership positions. One option could be to reimagine the strategy for engaging upper organizational and HR leaders and enhance or improve, where applicable, their sense of urgency with diversity and inclusion initiatives. One metric for this initiative could be internal with intentional selection of high potential African American women and provide the requisite training and development opportunities with specified milestones and alignment with a succession planning strategy. Another metric could be external with a level of aggressive recruitment of high potential African American women with the requisite education and experience. Additional training and development opportunities should also be afforded to the external high potentials. The metrics for this engagement could be part of the annual performance review and reflect the leaders' level of support towards leadership development and career advancement in alignment with the organizational diversity and inclusion strategy for African American women.

### **Recommendation Three: Be More Intentional About College Recruitment**

One of the participants described visiting a historically black college and university (HBCU) as a pleasure because of the opportunity to provide the benefit of her experience but admitted that there was a lack of African American female recruitment

from not only HBCUs but non-HBCU entities. What I did not hear from participants was any participation they did in any organization's internship or leadership development programs. College recruitment of African American women need to be more intentional to increase the number of participants in these programs, which in turn could increase the number of high potentials within the senior leadership pipeline. The recommendation is also to create a scorecard and hold leaders responsible for achieving higher metrics.

There are colleges and universities with African American organizations and departments, for example, that HR leaders and representatives could actively build relationships with towards recruitment for organizational internships and leadership development programs. There is the possibility that being intentional in recruiting African American women in this way could lead to a heightened sense of self-efficacy, ability to envision and expect achievement in gaining high-level roles, and opportunities to devise personal and professional goals towards achieving those roles (Fouad & Santana, 2017; Lent & Brown, 2013; Watts et al., 2015). This new path means that organizational and HR leaders must demonstrate their commitment to diversity and inclusion, which includes the previous recommendations within this study.

### **Implications**

The purpose of this section is to convey the implications of this study from a positive social change, conceptual framework, and organizational practices perspective. The sub-section on positive social change describes the potential impact from the appropriate levels (individual, family, organizational, and societal/policy). The

conceptual framework sub-section describes the implications as appropriate. The organizational practices describe recommendations for practice.

### **Positive Social Change**

By understanding the lived experiences of the participants (current and past senior-level African American women) from this study, organizational and HR leaders may be able to use the results of this study to reflect on and reconsider the effectiveness of their policies, programs, and strategies on recruitment, talent management, diversity and inclusion policies and programs, and succession planning. Through improvement of organizational and HR strategies, there is the possibility of a social change opportunity to enhance the career advancement experiences of African American women from an individual perspective, thus, increasing the organizational high potential candidate pool and addressing the lack of diversity in senior-level positions from an organizational perspective.

As the number of African American women in senior-level positions increase, there is the potential of a paradigm shift in thoughts, beliefs, and traditions. From a societal and workplace perspective, the characteristics or ideas of a leader may be expanded to not only include masculine and Caucasian/White but also African American women. From a traditional sense as described by the literature (Morgan, McDaniel, Miller, & Preston, 1993), there is the potential for African American women who are head of households to have an increased probability of improving their family socio-economic status as they continue to climb the career ladder, thus, decreasing the cycle of African American children not having a role model in leadership that look like them.



### **Implications for Practice**

The HR department has a tremendous responsibility within an organization. This responsibility reflects the impact on employees' careers and performance and the financial outcomes of the organization (Kramer, 2014). With the low number of African American women in senior-level positions, organizational and HR leaders' recognition of diversity and inclusion importance towards a competitive advantage, and the changing demographics within the workplace and society, a new path must be considered to recruit, promote, and retain African American women.

As expressed by the participants and the literature, there are several African American women who hold a major portion of higher-level degrees and have a range of required professional experiences, which negates any views that this group lacks preparedness to effectively perform in a senior-level position (Angel et al., 2013; BLS, 2015). HR leaders should create synergy with organizational leaders to reimagine their strategies and take advantage of the high potential talent, internal and external, that is in the African American population of women already in the workforce or close to graduating from college. From a long-term perspective, taking a lead role in unifying the various community resources to develop a grander community initiative to make African American females ready for college and leadership roles potentially within the sponsoring organization. With having such an investment in these young lives, there is the potential to have a positive effect on their decision-making ability, which could lead to a heightened sense of self-efficacy, ability to envision and expect achievement in gaining high-level roles, and opportunities to devise personal and professional goals

towards achieving those roles (Fouad & Santana, 2017; Lent & Brown, 2013; Watts et al., 2015). By reimagining the organizational strategy, organizational and HR leaders may have the means to increase organizational innovation, financial success, and organizational capabilities towards sustaining a competitive advantage and keeping their promise of corporate social responsibility (Galinsky et al., 2015; Harjoto et al., 2015; Johns, 2013).

### **Contribution to the Literature and Future Studies**

Only through a literature review can a researcher determine the gap(s) in the research to expand a specific body of knowledge. The uniqueness of this study pertained to expanding research with an SCCT lens around a specific population (senior-level African American women) in the workforce and their career decision-making strategies (Duffy et al., 2013). By exploring the lived experiences of these women, I was able to uncover what decisions they made, how those decisions manifested, and the role that their perceived self-efficacy beliefs, outcome expectations, and personal goal placed in their pursuit of a senior-level position and during their career journeys.

This study can provide an opportunity for other researchers to explore this phenomenon in a similar fashion. With respect to future studies, I provided the details of how I conducted the data collection for this study – before, during, and after the interview process. Future researchers may elect to perform a qualitative study with different demographics (i.e. age specific, other minority race, etc.), within a specific geographic location vs. across the continental United States, a specific industry (manufacturing,

research and development, etc.), and other elements. I also realized other potential gaps as identified in the literature for future research, which included:

- The lack of comparison in career development and advancement between African American women and men versus the typical research of comparing African American women and White/European women (Gardner Jr et. al., 2014).
- The comparison between men and women in the hospitality field and in terms of the level of issues or barriers because of the glass-ceiling effect versus self-imposed issues or barriers experienced (Boone et al., 2013).
- An examination of women's leadership development programs on an individual and organizational level from a transformational learning and change perspective (Debebe, Bilimoria, & Anderson, 2016).

### **Conclusion**

The long-standing management problem identified for this study was the underutilization of African American women's lived experiences by organizational and HR leaders in the development and implementation of recruitment, retention, talent development, diversity and inclusion, and succession planning strategies. The purpose of this study was to fill a gap in the literature as there is a lack of research on understanding the career advancement decision-making strategies of senior-level African American women concerning the lack of diversity in senior-level positions (Duffy et al., 2013; Inda et al., 2013). By understanding the process by which individuals, specifically African American women, made their career decisions using an SCCT lens, there may exist a social change opportunity for organizational and HR leaders to reflect on and reconsider

the effectiveness of their policies, programs, and strategies on recruitment, talent management, diversity and inclusion policies and programs, and succession planning (Holder et al., 2015; Nachmias & Walmsley, 2015; Nkomo & Hoobler, 2014). The 12 (current and previous) senior-level African American women of this study provided enough rich information to derive at themes and formulate recommendations in alignment with the analysis.

In addition to the nomenclature of career advancement and pursuit of a leadership role (e.g. mentors, networking, etc.), most evident from the interviews was the realization of having to play the game. The game, which was a sub-theme of leadership/leadership development, referred to those unwritten rules of being hired for a position and career advancement or deemed the political system, process, or movement within an organization that benefited some and not others. Participants expressed that not understanding the intricacies and then becoming a part of the game effected their facets of SCCT (i.e. self-efficacy beliefs, outcome expectations, and personal goals), which then evolved into career decision-making for the better and, at times, to their detriment. The game was not the only effect on these facets as family, education, authenticity (e.g. being true to self), and religion/faith emerged as themes as well. For example, family circumstances had a great deal to do with their socio-economic status and exposure opportunities to role models, mentors, and other resources pertinent to development of decision-making abilities, SCCT facets, and opportunities along their career path towards the pursuit of leadership roles. All the themes had a common denominator, which was confidence. The families' encouragement, the experiences of education and leadership

development, being true to self, and one's faith all played a part in strengthening the level of confidence in their abilities, which led to expectations and development of personal goals towards deciding to pursue a senior-level position.

The recommendations within this study were but the start of the brainstorming that organizational and HR leaders may incorporate into their strategy sessions regarding their recruitment, retention, talent development, diversity and inclusion, and succession planning strategies regarding African American women. Included in the recommendations were the perspectives of short-term and long-term investments: lead the unification of community resources, create synergy among organizational and HR leaders to reimagine their diversity and inclusion strategy, and be more intentional about college recruitment. This recommended new path may ignite a social change and demonstrate to the communities in which organizations reside, as well as from a national and international perspective, the strength of their organization's leadership and commitment to the people within those communities.

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## Appendix: Interview Protocol - Scripts & Questions

### **Overview**

- Individual interviews will be conducted via an online communication tool, such as Google Hangout, Skype, or other tools as selected by the participant.
- Open-ended questions will provide participants with an opportunity to determine the best way to respond and give voice to their experiences that led up to obtaining a senior-level position within an organization.
- Clarifying questions will be asked to gain better insight into the response or obtain more details about the response.
- Forward interview questions to participants at least two days prior to the interview date, which will give them time to carefully consider their responses and prevent the participant from being caught off guard.

### **Interview Introduction Checklist**

- Communicate the structure of the interview to include: recording, taking notes, and use of a code in lieu of participant's name.
- Use verbal and non-verbal cues to make the participant feel comfortable.
- Interview # \_\_\_\_\_
- Date \_\_\_\_\_ / \_\_\_\_\_ / \_\_\_\_\_

### **Introduction Script**

Hi! My name is Marquita, and I am so happy to meet you and appreciate your acceptance to participate in my study. How are you today? Note that this is a semi-formal interview, so if you want to talk longer than scheduled, I am perfectly fine with that.

To begin, I just want to confirm that the interview is slated for 60 to 75 minutes and will include five (5) demographic and ten (10) topic questions. The questions were designed to gain a better understanding of how African American women view their decision-making strategies and the personal and external elements that helped to shape those decisions. Please feel free to expand upon your responses and give voice to this important topic in management.

To ensure I accurately capture your responses, I would like your permission to record this interview. Please know that your responses, as well as your resume, will remain confidential.

Your participation in this study is voluntary. If, at any time during the interview, you wish to take a break or discontinue the recording or the interview itself, please let me know. There are no consequences if you decide to end the interview before its conclusion.

After this interview, I will transcribe your responses and forward to you to confirm the accuracy of the content. A copy of finalized study will be sent to you upon its publication.

Are there any questions or concerns that you have before we begin? Then with your permission, I would like to begin recording and our discussion.

### **Interview & Questions**

Today's date is \_\_\_\_\_. My name is Marquita Barron, and I am a doctoral student at Walden University conducting my research in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree in Management. I am with Participant #\_\_\_\_, who has electronically consented to participate in today's interview as a contribution to my study entitled *Senior-Level African American Women, Underrepresentation, and Career Decision-Making*. Let's begin with some background questions.

### **Demographic Questions:**

1. At what age did you first pursue a senior-level position (vice president or higher)?  
20-29 \_\_\_\_ 30-39 \_\_\_\_ 40-49 \_\_\_\_ 50+ \_\_\_\_
2. How many years did it take you to gain a senior-level position once you pursued?  
\_\_\_\_\_
3. What is your highest level of education completed?  
High School \_\_\_\_ Bachelor's \_\_\_\_ Master's \_\_\_\_ Ph.D. \_\_\_\_
4. What is your current senior-level position?  
Vice President \_\_\_\_ Senior Vice President \_\_\_\_ Executive Vice President \_\_\_\_  
CEO/CIO/CFO \_\_\_\_ Board Member \_\_\_\_ No longer in a senior-level role \_\_\_\_
5. What believe was your socio-economic status during childhood?

Upper Class/Elite \_\_\_ Upper Middle Class \_\_\_ Lower Middle \_\_\_

Working Class \_\_\_ Lower Class/Working Poor \_\_\_ I elect not to answer \_\_\_

**RQ 1: What decisions-making strategies do African American women use to attain senior-level management positions?**

1. What life experiences do you believe contributed most to your decision to pursue a senior-level position?
2. Describe the decisions that you believe made a positive impact toward acquiring a senior-level position and how those decisions manifested.
3. Describe the decisions that you believe may have hindered or not helped your progress or created issues toward acquiring a senior-level position and how those decisions manifested.

**RQ 2: How have facets of social cognitive career theory (SCCT) (e.g. self-efficacy beliefs, outcome expectations, and personal goals) impacted the decision-making process of African American women for career advancement?**

- **Self-efficacy defined:** One's belief (or perception) in one's ability to affect expected outcomes based on the actions or behaviors by the individual.
- **Outcome Expectations defined:** What an individual may imagine or envision as the result(s) or consequence(s) for engaging in a particular behavior or taking a particular action.

- **Personal Goals defined:** The intent of an individual to either pursue a career or career level (choice goal) or achieve a level of accomplishment (performance goal) based on perceived self-efficacy and outcome expectations.
4. In your opinion, how has learning/education (via academia and/or industry) heightened your ability to make the decision to pursue a senior-level position?
  5. Please describe life experiences (childhood and/or adulthood) that you believe contributed most to you envisioning being in a senior-level position?
  6. Please describe what you envisioned to be the actions or behaviors that were necessary for you to exhibit to obtain a senior-level position and the actual actions that were necessary.
  7. How would you describe the evolution of your personal goals at each stage of your career towards a senior-level position?
  8. If you knew then what you know now, describe any career decisions that you would change and why?
  9. What advice would you give about career decision-making strategies to other African American women, who may be considering the pursuit of a senior-level position?
  10. Is there anything else you feel is important to add about this topic that I need to know?

### **Conclusion Script**

This concludes our time for today. Again, thank you for sharing your experiences and perspectives on this topic. Your confidentiality is important to me, so know that I

will keep this information under a secured password on my laptop and then transfer this information to a flash drive to be kept in a safe deposit box for a minimum of five years to then be destroyed.

The next steps are for me to transcribe today's interview and then forward that transcription to you to ensure that I captured your words and intent exactly. Once this study is scheduled for publishing, I will forward you a copy for your records.

Are there any question that you have for me about next steps or anything else about the interview or process?

I appreciate your contribution to research. Have a great day!

(Stop recording)