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The Lived Experiences and Perceptions of African American Women in Federal Senior Leadership

LaTonya Michelle Mitchell
Walden University

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Walden University

College of Health Sciences

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LaTonya M. Mitchell

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Review Committee

Dr. Cheryl Cullen, Committee Chairperson, Health Services Faculty

Dr. Jennifer Edwards, Committee Member, Health Services Faculty

Dr. Vibha Kumar, University Reviewer, Health Services Faculty

Chief Academic Officer

Eric Riedel, Ph.D.

Walden University

2019

Abstract

The Lived Experiences and Perceptions of African American Women in
Federal Senior Leadership

by

LaTonya M. Mitchell

MSA, Central Michigan University, 2002

BA, Park University (formally Park College), 1992

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Health Services

Walden University

May 2019

Abstract

In the United States, African American women remain underrepresented in senior leadership positions in many workforce sectors, including the federal sector. Despite this challenge, a few African American women have successfully attained senior leadership responsibilities in a public health service agency. Using intersectionality and social cognitive career theory as the theoretical frameworks, the purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of African American women leaders in their career advancement to senior leadership positions in a health service agency of the Department of Health and Human Services in the United States. The research questions explored the experiences and perceptions of these women leaders and ways the intersection of race and gender contributed to their leadership experiences. A qualitative research design using a transcendental phenomenological approach was the chosen method. Data were collected through semistructured interviews with eight African American women leaders at the General Schedule Grade 15 and Senior Executive Service levels. Data were analyzed using the van Kaam method modified by Moustakas. Results indicated that while African American women leaders faced challenges and barriers, strategies exist to enhance career advancement. The results from this study may support social change by elevating understanding of the experiences and perspectives whereby strategies for increasing the career advancement of aspiring African American women leaders can be identified. When organizational leaders become more culturally competent, they can implement approaches that promote diversity within the senior leadership positions, which can have an overall effect on meeting the needs of a diverse population.

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Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to my family who provided me unconditional love and continuous support and encouragement during this doctoral journey. Your belief in me that I could be Dr. Mitchell-Holmes inspired me to keep pressing forward and make this a reality. I can't say I love you enough!

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career experiences with me. May God continue to bless them and inspire them to mentor others to seek their goals!

Table of Contents

List of Tables	v
List of Figures	vi
Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study.....	1
Background of the Study	2
Problem Statement	4
Purpose of the Study	5
Research Questions	7
Theoretical Frameworks	7
Nature of the Study	9
Definitions.....	10
Assumptions.....	12
Scope and Delimitations	13
Limitations	13
Significance.....	14
Summary	17
Chapter 2: Literature Review	19
Introduction.....	19
Literature Search Strategy.....	20
Theoretical Frameworks	21
Intersectionality.....	21
Social Cognitive Career Theory.....	25

Historical Perspectives in African American Women in Leadership	30
African Americans in Public Health Services Workforce	36
Workforce Diversity	38
Cultural Competency	43
Career Advancement Barriers or Challenges.....	45
Metaphorical Barriers	47
Stereotypes	49
Biases	53
Career Advancement Strategies and Facilitators	56
Mentorship	57
Networks	61
Sponsorship.....	64
Executive Coaching	65
Leadership Training and Development.....	67
Leadership Development and Career Ascension of African American Women	68
Summary and Conclusions	72
Chapter 3: Research Method.....	75
Introduction.....	75
Research Design and Rationale	75
Role of Researcher	77
Methodology	80
Participant Selection	80

Instrumentation	83
Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection	84
Data Analysis Plan	86
Issues of Trustworthiness.....	90
Credibility	91
Transferability.....	91
Dependability	92
Confirmability.....	93
Ethical Procedures	93
Summary	94
Chapter 4: Results	96
Introduction.....	96
Research Setting.....	97
Demographics	97
Data Collection	99
Data Analysis	100
Evidence of Trustworthiness.....	104
Credibility	104
Transferability.....	105
Dependability	106
Confirmability.....	106
Results.....	107

Summary	136
Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations	141
Introduction.....	141
Interpretation of the Findings.....	142
Limitations of the Study.....	158
Recommendations.....	159
Implications for Positive Social Change.....	160
Conclusions.....	163
References.....	165
Appendix A: Interview Protocol Guide	208
Appendix B: Participant Recruitment Invitation	211
Appendix C: Audit Trail	212

List of Tables

Table 1. Research Matrix	84
Table 2. Study Participant Demographics	98
Table 3. Emergent Themes and Subthemes for Research Question 1.....	108
Table 4. Emergent Themes and Subthemes for Research Question 2	117
Table 5. Emergent Themes for Research Question 3	130
Table 6. Emergent Themes and Subthemes (Aggregate) for RQ1-RQ3	139

List of Figures

Figure 1. Relationship map connecting themes for RQ1	146
Figure 2. Relationship map connecting themes for RQ2.....	153
Figure 3. Relationship map connecting themes for RQ3.....	157

Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

There is an underrepresentation of African American women in senior leadership positions in the United States workforce (Beckwith, Carter, & Peters 2016). Even within public health service agencies of the federal sector, African American women have struggled to attain senior leadership responsibilities. Despite the low level of representation, a few African American women have navigated the workplace successfully, and it is worth understanding their experiences and perceptions as they advanced into senior leadership positions. Limited research existed on how African American women experience leadership and achieve leadership roles (Davis & Maldonado, 2015). Stories about the career progression of women of African American in leadership are largely untold.

In the United States, individuals from the African diaspora are commonly referred to as African Americans (Galperin, Michaud, Sanaji, & Taleb, 2018). African diaspora focuses on connections developed historically and culturally (Galperin et al., 2018). The experiences of African Americans may provide different, and even contrasting, approaches which individuals in the United States have understood racial and ethnic differences (Waters, Kasinitz, & Asad, 2014). Race and racial marginalization are central elements to the experiences related to the diaspora and influence diverse forms of racial and ethnic identities, as well as the connections and perceptions of the immigration of individuals with African ancestry to the United States (Thorton, Taylor, Chatters, & Forsythe-Brown, 2017).

This study may provide an opportunity to listen to the voices of African American women that have been relatively silent in the past. The insights gained from women leaders may help gain a deeper understanding of the challenges encountered and strategies used to attain senior leadership (Javadi et al., 2016).

The potential social implication of the study was two-fold. First, the study may enhance diversity in leadership in the public health service workforce. Diversity in leadership in the public sector would lead to better government through improved efficiencies, innovation, and effectiveness (Kohli, Gans, & Hairston, 2011). More importantly, diversity in leadership in health services is essential because it can influence access to health services for individuals from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds (Silver, 2017). Second, the insights gained from African American women, both positive and negative, may be instrumental in helping aspiring African American women to achieve senior leadership positions successfully. Tapping into the potential of women in health services strengthens the contributions they could offer to enhancing leadership effectiveness and strengthening health services (Javadi et al., 2016).

Chapter 1 includes the background of the study, problem statement, purpose of the study, research questions, theoretical frameworks, and the nature of the study. The chapter also includes definitions, assumptions, scope and delimitations, limitations, the significance of the study, and summary.

Background of the Study

Evidence shows that inequalities remain for African American women. African Americans experience more difficulties reaching leadership positions than do their

Caucasian colleagues (Wyatt & Silvester, 2015). Although African American women have increased their representation in both managerial and professional positions, the gap remains in senior leadership positions (Jawando, Frye, & Wiley, 2016). African American women view race and gender identities as a double jeopardy circumstance, which makes ascending the hierarchical ladder a more challenging undertaking for them than for their Caucasian female colleagues (Key et al., 2012). In fiscal year (FY) 2016, nearly 79% of the Senior Executive Service (SES) workforce in the U.S. federal government were dominated by Caucasian men and women, and only 11% of SES positions were held by African Americans (United States Office of Personnel Management [U.S. OPM], 2016b).

Barriers and challenges hinder opportunities for African American women assuming roles as public leaders (Jawando et al., 2016). For example, stereotypes and implicit bias have created obstacles for African American women to overcome (Jawando et al., 2016). The barriers African American's encounter as blocking their advancement up the hierarchal ladder is referred to as the "concrete ceiling" because such barriers are difficult to shatter (Beckwith et al., 2016).

A gap in the literature exists in that a paucity of research has explored the issue of intersectionality in federal sector organizations (Hamidullah & Riccucci, 2017). There has been limited focus on the concerns of African American women in the workplace (Aiken, Salmon, & Hanges, 2013). Much of the existing literature that utilizes social cognitive career theory (SCCT) as the theoretical framework for the career development of African Americans has focused on math and science professions primarily, and few

SCCT studies exist of African American participants from other career professions (Scheuermann, Tokar, & Hall, 2014). Lastly, a plethora of data exists in the literature about African American women leaders in academic and religious sectors; however, there is little research about African American women in leadership position in other sectors, including the federal government (Johnson, 2015).

In this study, I present different perspectives and experiences of women leaders of African American ethnicity in a health service agency. Previous research on African American women leaders has gained scant consideration by leadership scholars (Rosette & Livingston, 2012). This study can fill a necessary gap in the literature as well as provide an opportunity and a responsibility to hear from African American women. This study may provide agency leaders with potential strategies in promoting and supporting a diverse leadership workforce and providing aspiring African American women leaders greater access to leadership opportunities.

Problem Statement

In the United States, the health services workforce does not reflect the country's rich diversity (National Conference of State Legislatures [NCSL], 2014; Valentine, Wynn, & McLean, 2016). While individuals of diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds represent nearly 25% of the U.S. population, they comprise only 10% of professional workers within the health service sector (NCSL, 2014). In 2016, African American women represented nearly 14% of total female population in the United States, and 23% age 25 and older had at least a bachelor's degree (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.). Within that same age group, 33% of Caucasian women had at least a bachelor's degree (U.S. Census

Bureau, n.d.). The problem in this study is that 64% of the U.S. workforce in the public health service sector is women and 16% of that are African American women (U.S. OPM, n.d.a). Of the senior executive leaders in the public health service sector, 223 (53%) are women and of that group only 31 (14%) are African American women (U.S. OPM, n.d.a). Despite educational attainment, African American women were underrepresented in the public health service sector in senior leadership positions (American Association of University Women [AAUW], 2016; Catalyst, 2017; Hughes, 2014; Johns, 2013).

Empirical research addressing the underrepresentation of African American women leaders within in a federal health service agency is inadequate. Previous studies explored how women, specifically African American women, attained senior leadership positions within the private sector; few empirical studies expanded to the public health service sector (Beckwith et al., 2016; Cook & Glass, 2014; Holder, Jackson, & Ponterotto, 2015). Few researchers focused on African American women leaders, which has led to a paucity of empirical studies about the leadership development and leadership experiences of women from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds (Hannum, Muhly, Shockley-Zalabak, & White, 2015; Rosette & Livingston, 2012).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences and perceptions of African American women in their career advancement to senior leadership positions in a health service agency of the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) in the United States. My goal for this study was to

focus on the intersectionality of race and gender that contributed to the career advancement of African American women leaders into a General Service (GS)-15 and Senior Executive Service (SES) leadership position in HHS.

In the federal government, the GS classification and pay system includes most civilian employees serving in positions that are professional, technical, administrative, and clerical (U.S. OPM, n.d.c). The GS has 15 grades, from the GS-1, as the lowest grade, to the GS-15, as the highest grade (U.S. OPM, n.d.c). Based on the complexity of the position, the duties and responsibilities, and the required qualifications, federal agencies establish the grade for each job based (U.S. OPM, n.d.c). According to the United States Office of Personnel Management (U.S. OPM) (2017), “the SES covers managerial, supervisory, and policy positions classified above GS-15” (p. 2).

Intersectionality offers deeper knowledge into the social formulation of multiple social inequalities, such as race and gender, as mutually constructing phenomena that help shape social inequalities and not as individual, mutually exclusive constructs (Collins, 2015). Intersectionality highlights how various identities, such as race and gender, influence what is taking place (Paludi & Mills, 2013). In this case, intersectionality is central to the study and participant responses led to a deeper understanding of how multiple factors impact the leadership roles of African American women. Because research on the intersectionality of race and gender identities is in beginning stages, additional research warranted attention (Bowleg, 2012; Hoyt & Murphy, 2016).

Research Questions

I used the following three research question to guide this study:

Research Question 1 (RQ1): What are the lived experiences of African American women who have attained a senior leadership position in a federal health service agency within HHS?

Research Question 2 (RQ2): What are the perceptions of African American women who have attained a senior leadership position in a federal health service agency with HHS?

Research Question 3 (RQ3): In what ways did the intersection of race and gender contribute to the leadership experiences of African American women in senior leadership roles?

Theoretical Frameworks

The theoretical frameworks for this study were intersectionality and social cognitive career theory (SCCT). The origins of intersectionality emerged in 1989 from feminist legal scholar and critical race theorist, Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, who described the omission of Black women from both White feminist and antiracist discussions (Bowleg, 2012; Shin et al., 2017). The core tenets of intersectionality for this study included: (a) social identity are multiple and intersecting instead of independent and one dimensional, (b) individuals from marginalized and oppressed groups as the focus of attention, and (c) various social identities at the micro level intersect with structural factors, such as racism and sexism, at the micro level (Bowleg, 2012). Intersectionality provides an alternative to standard approaches of understanding the

subjugating experiences of women whose marginalization derives from different axes (Charleston, Adserias, Lang, & Jackson, 2014). In the case of an African American woman, the oppressive experiences include racial minority (race) and a woman (gender; Charleston et al., 2014). Scholars contend that an intersectional lens can uncover a situation between different identity groups, perspectives of both opportunity and subjugation, thereby forming a connection around shared experiences of inequity, marginalization, and opportunity (Carbado, Crenshaw, Mays, & Tomlinson, 2013). The framework of intersectionality is a useful tool to help make sense of how individuals and groups experience the interlocking systems of opportunity and oppressions (Shin et al., 2017).

In 1986, Albert Bandura developed social cognitive theory (SCT) from his 1960s social learning theory (SLT; Boston University School of Medicine, 2016). SCT posits that individual learning occurs in a social environment with a triadic reciprocal interaction of personal, behavioral, and environmental influences (Bandura, 1989; Boston University School of Medicine, 2016). Based on Bandura's SCT, SCCT was developed in 1994 by Lent, Brown, and Hackett (2006), who theorized that individuals learn by engaging with others and from the environment (Rasdi, Ismail, Uli, & Noah, 2009). The three core tenets of SCCT include self-efficacy beliefs, outcome expectations, and personal goals (Bounds, 2017; Lent & Brown, 2013; Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 2006; Scheuermann et al., 2014). Bounds (2017) emphasized that researchers use SCCT to explain how race and gender identities, as well as perceived and systemic career challenges, influence these core tenets. For African American women, SCCT posits they

will pursue opportunities, choose careers, and perform effectively in areas at which they have high self-efficacy beliefs if they possess the essential skills and environmental support to pursue desired career-related goals (Lent et al., 2006). SCCT was an appropriate tool for this study because it aided in gaining a deeper understanding of the perceptions and experiences of African American women who have successfully attained senior leadership.

Nature of the Study

The nature of this study was a qualitative phenomenological approach. A qualitative researcher's primary concerns pertain to meanings, such as individuals' sense making of the world, how they experience different situations and occurrences, and the interpretations ascribed to the phenomenon of interest (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). Yilmaz (2013) stated that a researcher uses qualitative approach to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of interest by obtaining and conveying verbatim the study participants' experiences from interviews. Data collection for this qualitative, phenomenological study was through face-to-face interviews with African American women leaders designated as senior leaders at the GS-15 and SES level. I generated data from the in-depth, semistructured interviews, as well as transcribed and analyzed the data using NVivo software. A transcendental phenomenological study helps researchers to describe experiences through the eyes of the study participants instead of presenting interpretations of the data by the researcher (Todd et al., 2016). A qualitative phenomenological approach was the optimal approach for this study in which I explored the lived experiences of African American women leaders to understand their

experiences and perceptions, as well as the constructed meanings from their career advancement as leaders.

Definitions

African American: An American who has ancestries or descents in any of the Black racial groups of Africa, South America, and the Caribbean (Pérez & Luquis, 2014; U.S. OPM, n.d.b.).

African diaspora: Terms which denotes millions of individuals dispersed from their African homeland to the United States due to either the European slave trade or the immigration of large number of individuals based on economic, political, and social causes (Galperin et al., 2018; Rotimi, Tekola-Ayele, Baker, & Shriner, 2016)

Black: Racial classification that is designated by a person's self-identification (U.S. Census Bureau, 2017). This term is used to include all non-White minority populations (Agyemang, Bhopal, & Bruijnzeels, 2005).

Coaching: A strategy used in leadership training and development, which means to take an individual from where they are currently to where he or she wants to progress in the future (Cameron & Ebrahimi, 2014).

Concrete ceiling: Descriptive term depicting career barriers that African American women cannot penetrate; the concrete ceiling signifies a career limiting factor that impacts individual's ability to ascend the organizational hierarchy and their ability to exist in the organization (Beckwith et al., 2016).

Cultural competence: Having the aptitude to work with and across cultures and groups from diverse backgrounds; it is the competency in which leaders encourage and

support inclusivity, as well as value and respect the differences of all groups (Chin, Desormeaux, & Sawyer, 2016)

Epoché: A process by which the researcher set aside prejudgments, preconceptions, and bias that are the result of previous knowledge and experience in order to derive new knowledge and experience of the phenomenon of interest as if for the first time (Moustakas, 1994).

Ethnicity: Term used to characterize individuals and groups that share common culture, heritage, religion, language or dialect, and norms (Anderson, Taylor, and Logio, 2014; Pérez & Luquis, 2014). African American is an ethnic group (Griffith, Johnson, Zhang, Neighbors, & Jackson, 2011).

General schedule (GS): The classification and pay plan, which includes 15 grades, with the GS-1 as the lowest and the GS-15 as the highest and covers most of the civil service employees in the federal government in administrative, clerical, professional, and technical positions (U.S. OPM, n.d.c).

Glass ceiling: Metaphor for women's inability to access senior level leadership positions and they are held to a mid-level positions, which is beneath but in full view of top organization positions (Carli & Eagly, 2016).

Implicit biases: Unconscious presumptions that impact the manner in which we perceive, assess, or interact with individuals for the groups that are the focus of our presumptions (Saul, 2013).

Intersectionality: Different ways race and gender interact to form the multiple dimensions of experiences African American women encounter in the workplace (Gopaldas, 2013).

Labyrinth: Metaphor used to describe the myriad challenges women encounter during their careers (Carli & Eagly, 2016).

Senior Executive Service: Positions, classified above the GS-15 grade level, which includes managerial, supervisory, and policy positions (U.S. OPM, 2017).

Sponsor: An individual in a senior leadership position who raises their protégé's visibility among other influential and senior-level leaders, advocates for high-visibility assignments and promotions for their protégé and utilizes their reputation as collateral for the career advancement of their protégé (Sherbin & Rashid, 2017).

Assumptions

I made numerous assumptions when completing this research study. First, I used snowball sampling strategy and voluntary nature identified study participants. Second, I assumed that all participants in this study would be willing participants because of its significance, and they would share their experiences and perspectives about their career advancement into senior leadership positions. Third, I assumed all study participants would provide honest and accurate responses and not what they think the researcher wants to hear. Fourth, I assumed the interviews would provide useful information upon which interpretations and conclusions can be drawn. Fifth, I assumed anonymity and confidentiality would be maintained during data collection. Sixth, I assumed the results generated from this research study would lead to positive social change.

Scope and Delimitations

My goal for this study was to explore the lived experiences and perceptions of African American women who have attained senior leadership positions in a health service agency. I selected this study because of my interest in advocating for and promoting diversity and inclusion in leadership and presenting how the intersectionality of race and gender and challenges faced by African American women may influence their advancement into leadership roles. I excluded individuals from demographics who are not African Americans women and individuals who work in other federal agencies outside the selected health service agency within HHS in the United States. I excluded participants from areas outside the United States, specifically territories of the United States and overseas participants. I also excluded African American women who have not attained a leadership position at the GS-15 or SES level. To attain the study participants, I contacted African American women leaders at the GS-15 and SES levels and asked them to recommend other African American women in senior leadership positions who might be willing to participate in the study and those individuals who met the selection criteria.

Limitations

This study was limited in five ways. First, I limited this study to African American women in senior leadership positions at the GS-15 and SES levels. Second, I recruited only study participants who work for a specific public health service agency within HHS. Third, the qualitative nature of the study was a limitation. The study participants self-reported their lived experiences, and no other data sources were utilized

to validate the responses provided by the participants. I relied heavily on the verification and validation of the interview transcripts and member checking. Member checking allows the participants to evaluate if the proposed synthesized themes reflect their perspectives accurately (Birt, Scott, Cavers, Campbell, & Waters, 2016; Yilmaz, 2013). Fourth, the findings were only generalizable to those individuals who participated in this qualitative study because findings gained from this approach are not intended to be generalizable to a larger population.

Lastly, my own biases as an African American woman in a senior leadership position was a limitation. In phenomenological analysis, researchers set aside bias and personal views of this study. I selected this qualitative phenomenological approach, that entails epoché, to help identify researcher bias and assumptions that could potentially hinder me from approaching this study from a non-biased perspective. Along with epoché, bracketing requires that the researcher holds into abeyance her knowledge and experience about the topic before and throughout the phenomenological investigation (Chan, Fung, & Chien, 2013). I bracketed and reserved my perspectives to the introduction and discussion portions of the study.

Significance

A review of the literature revealed a lack of research regarding the lived experiences and perceptions of African American women in senior leadership positions who work at a federal health service agency in HHS. The study has provided a source for gaining in-depth knowledge of the study participants' lived experiences and perceptions. Davis (2016) indicated that studies may contribute to the body of research that identifies

strategies for increasing the promotion potential and career advancement of African American women into senior leadership positions in a federal health service agency.

My goal for this study was to help change negative assumptions about African American women in the workplace. Implicit biases can influence behaviors and judgments in ways in which individuals are not consciously aware of and can control (Negowetti, 2014b). Implicit biases and perceptions are critical factors impacting employment decisions in the public sector (U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission [EEOC], 2013). Traditionally, African American women hold nonsupervisory, first-line supervisory, and mid-level managerial positions (Catalyst, 2017; Davis & Maldonado, 2015; U.S. EEOC, 2013). Because few African American women have attained senior leadership positions in the public sector, an implicit bias exists that African Americans do not possess leadership capabilities to perform senior leadership responsibilities (U.S. EEOC, 2013). Perception about African Americans in the public sector exists that racial disparities among this group impede career advancement opportunities (U.S. EEOC, 2013). The voices of African American women who have successfully attained senior leadership positions can help address implicit biases and help advance racial equity. Providing a platform for African American women in senior leadership positions may encourage other aspiring African American women who question their chances of promotion and are reluctant to aspire to senior leadership positions (U.S. EEOC, 2013). Importantly, gaining a deeper understanding of implicit biases can help professionals and agency leaders recognize how individual

actions and organizational practices impact racial inequity if not addressed through conscious efforts (Negowetti, 2014a).

HHS developed the National Standards for Culturally and Linguistically Appropriate Services (CLAS) for health and health care to help enhance health equality and quality as well as reduce health disparities (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services [HHS], Office of Minority Health [OMH], n.d.). One of the goals includes the importance of hiring, promoting, and supporting a diverse governance, leadership, and workforce that addresses the needs of the population they serve (U.S. HHS, OMH, n.d.). This study is relevant because it can directly address HHS' initiative that encourages diversity within senior leadership, which thereby broadens perspectives in the decision-making process. Moreover, the results obtained can enhance the cultural competency of leaders in a health service agency.

Increasing the number of African American women leaders in the health services workforce will contribute to creating a more diverse workforce. Diversity within a public health services workforce may lead to more culturally competent professionals who have the capability of meeting the needs of an ever-increasing diverse population (Silver, 2017; Valentine et al., 2016). Public health service professionals who match the diversity of the population may potentially be more efficient in enhancing health equity, addressing the health needs of individuals of diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds, and strengthening the nation's well-being (Duffus et al., 2014; Jackson & Gracia, 2014). By exploring the lived experiences and perceptions of African American women in senior leadership positions, the findings may inform agency leaders and key decision-makers

who can support a diverse workforce and develop and implement organizational strategies that target the upward mobility of African American women leaders. Agency leaders can gain competency for handling diversity as well as become knowledgeable about the lived experiences of senior leaders (Hughes, 2016).

Culture plays an essential role in organizational success (Society for Human Resource Management [SHRM], 2017). In order for diversity to permeate organizational culture, agency leaders will need to demonstrate leadership behaviors that promote diversity (SHRM, 2017). The strategies I identified from this study may enhance leadership behaviors and organizational culture that supports and values diversity. Insights attained from this empirical study may lead to positive social change whereby a diverse leadership workforce becomes the norm within a health service agency in HHS to serve a diverse population.

Summary

In Chapter 1, I introduced the research topic highlighting the underrepresentation of African American women in senior leadership in public health services. I provided the background, problem statement, and purpose of conducting a qualitative phenomenological study that will explore the experiences and perceptions of African American women in senior leadership positions in a health service agency in HHS from the lens of intersectionality and social cognitive career theory. Finally, I introduced the nature of the study, defined the key concepts and included the study's assumptions, scope and delimitations, limitations, and significance.

In Chapter 2, I present current literature related to African American women leaders and the theoretical frameworks that will guide this study. I include a thorough discussion of the factors that may contribute to the experiences and perceptions of African American in their career advancement to senior leadership positions.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to review the literature on African American women in senior leadership, with a focus on public health services. Although African American women have attained educational achievements, they remain underrepresented in senior leadership positions in the public health service sector (AAUW, 2016; Catalyst, 2017; Hughes, 2014). In this research of African American women working in senior leadership positions in a public health service organization, I explored the perceptions and experiences of how the intersection of race and gender influenced their career advancement. The theoretical frameworks of both intersectionality and SCCT informed this research. I explored several factors that contributed to the experiences and perceptions of the career advancement of African American women who have attained senior leadership positions.

This chapter includes a comprehensive review of the literature related to several content areas. To help understand the underrepresentation of African American women in senior leadership, this literature review included a review of studies related to: (a) intersectionality and social cognitive career theory as theoretical frameworks, (b) the historical perspective of African American women in leadership, (c) the public health service workforce, (d) workforce diversity, (e) cultural competency, (f) career advancement barriers and challenges, (g) career advancement strategies and facilitators, and the (h) leadership development of African American women. I used the literature to expand on the current understanding of African American women in senior leadership in

addition to the stories that the selected women share about their lived experiences of advancing into senior leadership positions. A collection of research regarding African American women in education and religion exists; however, research is sparse pertaining to African American women in leadership positions outside those sectors, such as the public sector (Stanley, 2009). Although limited research literature is available on African American women in leadership, I augmented the existing literature by documenting the lack of African American senior leaders in health services. My goal was to provide insight into the factors that may have contributed to their ascension to senior leadership positions as well as factors that continue to keep African American women underrepresented at the senior level.

Literature Search Strategy

Limited publications exist on the research subject matter and, as a result, I consulted multiple online databases in the Walden University Library including ABI/INFORM, Academic Source Complete, Business Source Complete, CINAHL Plus with Full Text, EBSCOhost, Emerald Insight, Medline with Full Text, ProQuest, SAGE, and ScienceDirect to generate academic and peer-reviewed sources. I used keywords and phrases, independently and in combination, to locate articles. These terms included: *African American women, bias, Black women, career advancement, career ascension, career barriers, career development, career strategies, cultural competency, diversity, health services, intersectionality, leaders, leadership, leadership development, management, minorities, social cognitive career theory, underrepresentation of women in*

leadership, and women of color. I used the Boolean operators, AND and OR, to combine keywords when searching the databases.

When searching the academic databases, I reviewed peer-reviewed articles published between 2000 to 2018 primarily, with current research dating back to 2013. I also used seminal work that dated back to 1988. I evaluated peer-reviewed journal articles and information from official websites of government agencies and non-profit organizations. I also searched ProQuest Dissertation combining the following keywords: *underrepresentation, African American, women, leader.* Examination of reference lists from published articles and dissertations chosen for my literature review enabled me to find additional references not identified while searching databases. In addition, I used Google Scholar search engine and my organization's online library to identify articles that may not have been available in the databases in the Walden Library. Lastly, I consulted the Health Services librarians to identify relevant search strategies for this subject matter.

Theoretical Frameworks

Intersectionality, coined by legal scholar Kimberle' Williams Crenshaw, and SCCT, developed by Robert Lent, Steven Brown, and Gail Hackett, served as the theoretical frameworks for this qualitative phenomenological study.

Intersectionality

Feminist legal scholar and critical race theorist, Kimberle' Williams Crenshaw (1991), coined the term intersectionality in 1989 to draw attention to the exclusion of Black women from both White feminist discussion, which associated White with women,

and antiracism discussion, which associated Black with men (Bowleg, 2012; Corlett & Mavin, 2014; Shin et al., 2017). Several African American feminist advocates in the United States developed the concept of intersectionality during the 20th century (Bowleg, 2012; Gopaldas, 2013). An early narrative of the intersectionality perspective about gender and race dates to Sojourner Truth's "Ain't I a Woman?" speech (Bowleg, 2012). The marginalization of African American women arises within both gender and antiracism discussions because their intersectional identity as both a "woman" and "of color" are shaped to respond to just one of the discussions and not both simultaneously (Crenshaw, 1991). Due to this exclusion in gender and antiracism discussions, an inaccurate categorization of experiences and perceptions of African American women occurred (Showunmi, Atewologun, & Bebbington, 2012). Intersectionality posits that the experiences and perceptions of individuals from any identity group may differ based on their designated social category, such as race and gender (Biernat & Sesko, 2013). In this study, I sought to understand how the intersectionality of race and gender affect the career advancement of African American women in senior leadership in a public health service agency.

The theoretical framework of intersectionality illustrates how individuals and groups experience the interlocking systems of opportunity and oppressions (Shin et al., 2017). Intersectionality provides knowledge of how multiple social identities cross at the individual (micro) level of one's experience to accentuate interlocking systems of opportunity and subjugation, such as racism and sexism, at the social structural (macro) level (Bowleg, 2012). The interlocking mechanism between the interconnection of social

identities cannot be separated (Tariq & Syed, 2017). Intersectionality may disclose the unique experiences of individuals who identify with several marginalized social identities (Breslin, Pandey, & Riccucci, 2017). Scholars contend that an intersectional lens can uncover a situation between different identity groups, perspectives of both opportunity and subjugation, thereby forming a connection around mutual experiences of opportunity, inequality, and marginalization (Carbado et al., 2013).

Three core tenets of intersectionality underscore this study. First, social identities are multiple, interdependent, and intersecting instead of independent and one dimensional (Bowleg, 2012; Gopaldas, 2013). The intersectionality perspective contends that race and gender complement one another to the extent that one of the social identities cannot explain disparate consequences without intersection with the other social category (Bowleg, 2012). Second, the focal point of intersectionality is individuals from marginalized and oppressed groups, such as racial and ethnic minorities (Bowleg, 2012; Dill & Zambrana, 2009). An intersectionality perspective offers an in-depth understanding into how several social identities intersect in multifaceted ways to reveal social inequality (Bowleg, 2012). Furthermore, intersectionality emphasizes the importance of not overlooking any voices, specifically marginalized and oppressed voices (Gopaldas, 2013). Third, various social identities at the micro level intersect with structural factors, such as racism and sexism, at the macro level (Bowleg, 2012). At a micro-level, intersectionality infers that because individuals have several intersecting social identities, they also experience several opportunities and subjugations (Gopaldas, 2013). At the macro-level, the concept of intersectionality pertains to the diversity and

interconnection of social identities (Gopaldas, 2013). As a result, intersectionality expands the knowledge of analysis of lived experiences to include the broader implications of social and institutional influences, both positive and negative, on individuals and members of social groups (Strayhorn, 2017).

An intersectionality lens provides an alternative approach for understanding the oppressive experiences of women whose marginalization derives from different axes (Charleston et al., 2014). Caucasian women may endure adversity because of gender; African American women may endure adversity because of race and gender (Charleston et al., 2014; Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010). The marginalization of African American women due to multiple social identities enables them to make valid assertions concerning oppressive experiences if neglected from leadership development opportunities (Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010).

In recent years, an intersectional framework has been used to advance studies pertinent to African American women leaders. Intersectionality treats gender, race, and other social identities as interdependent instead of independent, single-dimensional, identities and is appropriate to examine leadership (Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010). Intersectionality offers a critical perspective for potentially extending one's understanding of leadership in the public sector as well as highlighting opportunities and challenges to leadership experiences (Breslin et al., 2017). Similarly, Chin (2013) contended that the intersectionality of race and gender has perpetuated situations that impact leadership experiences, such as challenges, disparities, power, and expectations associated with these social identities. In the study conducted by Rosette, Koval, Ma, and

Livingston (2016), the researchers' review of the literature suggested that African American and Asian American women may have unique challenges and opportunities in comparison to Caucasian women as they pursue leadership positions. By using an intersectional perspective, they examined the influences of racial stereotypes and biases against African American women aspiring into leadership positions (Rosette, Koval, Ma, & Livingston, 2016).

Intersectionality has been used to explore the underrepresentation of African American women in leadership. For example, Davis and Maldonado's (2015) phenomenological study applied an intersectionality framework to explore the leadership development of African American women in academia. Charleston et al. (2014) utilized intersectionality as the theoretical framework to explore the role of race and gender of African American women in their pursuit of careers in the fields of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics. Several researchers have applied the intersectionality theory to explore the underrepresentation of women, including women of diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds, in leadership (e.g., Holvino, 2010; Keshet, Popper-Giveon, and Liberman, 2015; Luna, 2016; Showunmi et al., 2012; and Tarik & Syed, 2017).

Social Cognitive Career Theory

In 1986, Albert Bandura SCT; Boston University School of Medicine, 2016). The fundamental concept of SCT is triadic reciprocal determinism, which posits that learning takes place in a social environment with mutual interactions among the three components of influences: (a) personal and other cognitive, (b) behavioral, and (c) environmental (Bandura, 1988, 1989; Boston University School of Medicine, 2016; McCormick, 2001).

Based on Bandura's SCT, SCCT was developed in 1994 by Lent et al. (2006) who theorized that individuals learn by engaging with others and from the environment (Rasdi et al., 2009). Given SCCT's emphasis on both personal and contextual factors, this theoretical framework has been used to understand the career development of women and individuals from diverse ethnic backgrounds, such as African American women (O'Neill, Shapiro, Ingols, & Blake-Beard, 2013; Scheuermann, Tokar, & Hall, 2014). The aim of SCCT is to explain three interrelated aspects of career development: (a) how one develops career interests, (b) how one makes career decisions, and (c) how one attains career success (Lent et al., 2006).

The three core tenets of SCCT include self-efficacy beliefs, outcome expectations, and personal goals (Bounds, 2017; Lent & Brown, 2013; Lent et al., 2006; Scheuermann et al., 2014). Bounds (2017) emphasized that researchers use SCCT to explain how race and gender identities, as well as perceived and systemic career challenges, influence these core tenets. Specifically, SCCT posits that personal inputs, such as race and gender, and background contextual factors, such as socioeconomic status and educational levels, influence self-efficacy beliefs and positive and negative outcome expectations due to learning experiences germane to one's career (O'Neill et al., 2013; Scheuermann et al., 2014). As a result, self-efficacy and outcome expectations influence an individual's interests, outcomes, and decisions germane to one's career (Rasdi et al., 2009; Scheuermann et al., 2014). For African American women, SCCT posits they will pursue opportunities, choose careers, and perform effectively in areas at which they have high

self-efficacy beliefs if they possess the essential skills and environmental support to pursue desired career-related goals (Lent et al., 2006).

Self-efficacy. Self-efficacy refers to an individual's judgment concerning their capability to perform a behavior effectively in a manner that generates desired results (Boston University School of Medicine, 2016; Lent et al., 2006; Stajkovic & Luthans, 2003). Self-efficacy, considered the principle tenet of SCCT, exudes the influences of person inputs, contextual variables, and learning experiences to career-related goals and behaviors (Deemer, Thoman, Chase, & Smith, 2014). Characteristics of individuals with high self-efficacy include having high ambitions and being goal-oriented, the ability to persevere through difficult situations, the tendency to seek and accomplish difficult challenges, and the ability to focus on successful outcomes instead of personal deficiencies or barriers (Bandura, 1997; McCormick, 2001). Performance achievements can be the result of someone having strong efficacy for handling obstacles and barriers despite barriers and challenges related to racism and other oppressive behaviors (Hackett & Byars, 1996; Lent et al., 2006). According to the social constructivist model, individuals construct their experience of barriers and challenges from perceptions, experiences, and expectations instead of external barriers (Kim & O'Brien, 2018). In a study conducted by Beckwith, Carter, and Peters (2016), the researchers suggested self-efficacy is an essential trait for African American women leaders to excel despite challenges and may provide these leaders leverage in their ability to achieve success.

Outcome expectations. Another important concept of SCCT is outcome expectations which refers to thoughts and perspectives about the consequences or

outcomes of accomplishing various activities (e.g., what are the outcome if I try this activity?) (Lent & Brown, 2013; Lent et al., 2006). Lent and Brown (2013) emphasized the three anticipated consequences outcomes include social, material, and self-evaluative, which refer to benefits to one's family, financial gains, and self-approval, respectively. Individuals anticipate the outcome of their actions, and these anticipated consequences can influence if completion of the behavior leads to success or failure (Boston University School of Medicine, 2016).

Lent et al. (2006) suggested that individuals will consider their self-efficacy beliefs and consequences and outcomes before deciding on which activities they will pursue as well as the amount of efforts and persistence they will give for such activities. For example, individuals have a greater tendency to engage in activities which lead to positive and valued outcomes (Lent et al., 2006). Kaminsky and Behrend (2014) advocated that self-efficacy and outcome expectations have a favorable association with career interests and goals. Individuals with high self-efficacy beliefs and favorable outcome expectations will establish challenging goals for themselves than individuals with lower self-efficacy beliefs or less favorable outcome expectations (Brown, Lent, Telander, & Tramayne, 2011).

Personal goals. An essential concept of SCCT is personal goals. The definition of personal goals entails an individual's intent to participate in a specified activity or to achieve a defined level of performance (Lent et al., 2006). In SCCT, these two types of goals are characterized as choice goals and performance goals, respectively (Lent et al., 2006). The purpose of establishing goals is to help individuals shape and manage their

behavior as well as to maintain their behavior when a lack of positive feedback exists and when inevitable challenges occur (Lent et al., 2006). SCCT posits that the goals develop due to mutual relationships of self-efficacy beliefs and outcome expectations (Rasdi et al, 2009). Individuals likely establish specific goals that align with the beliefs of their personal abilities and the expected outcomes from engaging in specific actions (Lent et al., 2006). In a study conducted by O’Neill, Shapiro, Ingols, and Blake-Beard (2013), these researchers proposed that when women, specifically African American women, find themselves part of the minority population in the workplace due to their race or gender identities, they should avoid temptations to conform to the career aspirations of the majority population, and keep their career goals, which may be potentially different from the majority population. Organizational culture and structure may enforce conformance in attaining conventional goals identified by the majority population (O’Neill et al., 2013).

African American women historically have been underrepresented in senior level leadership positions, primarily due to societal barriers for both women and African Americans (Scheuermann et al., 2014). These women represent an ideal population in which to explore the SCCT framework for senior-level career decisions (Scheuermann et al., 2014). Rasdi, Ismail, Uhi, and Noah (2009) recommended employing SCCT elements when examining predictors of leaders’ career success. SCCT can offer a comprehensive approach to help explain how African American women in senior leadership view their career advancement. For example, Pearson and Bieschke (2001) used SCCT as a theoretical framework to explore how African American women make

meaning of familial influence on their career development. Similarly, O'Neill et al. (2013) used SCCT to frame their study which considered career goals of women from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds and how these goals may differ across ethnicities. In a literature review conducted by Rasdi et al. (2009), SCCT served as the theoretical framework for measuring career success for leaders in the public sector. Based on previous empirical studies and its applicability, SCCT was selected as a theoretical framework to help explore predictors of the career success of African American women leaders.

Historical Perspectives in African American Women in Leadership

Historically, women have faced challenges in their pursuit of attaining leadership roles within the U.S. workforce (Glass & Cook, 2017; Skaggs, Stainback, & Duncan, 2012). Allen and Lewis (2016) purported that even after attaining leadership roles in the public sector, African American women are often viewed as illegitimate and used for criticism instead of praise. This visible discernment in a period where distinct forces that offered men roles in public venues and relegated women to private, domestic roles were used to further distance perspectives of African American women as competent, legitimate, and skilled in their roles in society (Allen & Lewis, 2016). In 1940, 70% of employed African American women held positions as either domestic servants or farm laborers (United States Commission on Civil Rights [U.S. CCR], 1990). By 1980, African American women made some advances in the workforce and held clerical positions, which were underrepresented in 1940 (U.S. CCR, 1990). However, African American women continued to be overrepresented in low-level positions and

underrepresented in middle- and high-level positions (U.S. CCR, 1990). Allen and Lewis (2016) acknowledged that leadership positions held by marginalized groups, such as African American women, have been primarily relegated to low-level positions of organizations with even fewer women occupying mid-level positions and even fewer in senior-level positions. Eurocentric acts of oppression experienced by African American women that relegated them to low-level positions in society have impacted the way their ascended into leadership positions (Rosser-Mims, 2010).

Throughout history, a common belief held amongst many was that only men should serve in leadership roles (Gamble & Turner, 2015). African American women were not associated with leadership (Parker & Ogilvie, 1996). Rosser-Mims (2010) contended that, in comparison to both African American and Caucasian men, African American women have, historically, been forced to achieve leadership roles and acquire power by nontraditional approaches. Bell (1990) emphasized that African American women have received limited leadership opportunities and experiences in high-level positions through which to learn role responsibilities effectively. Allen and Lewis (2016) reinforced these perspectives and argued that African American women are viewed as inauthentic leaders since they do not fit the traditional prototype of a Caucasian male leader. For African American women, their work as leaders, historically, has not been recognized or its influences have been underrepresented (Allen & Lewis, 2016; Bonaparte, 2015).

Chin (2013) indicated that leadership research is often silent on how race influences the exercise of leadership and omits experiences of leaders from diverse racial

and ethnic backgrounds. The omission of experiences and perspectives from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds, specifically African Americans, does not provide an accurate depiction of the successes and challenges encountered in leadership (Chin, 2013). Historically, race and gender factors have been the stimuli for the acts of oppression experienced by African American women (Catalyst, 2004; U.S. CCR, 1990). As African Americans, they have experienced all the inequities suffered by their race (U.S. CCR, 1990). Like their male family members, African American women acquired a legacy of slavery and not granted equal access to educational and work opportunities as well as public locations (U.S. CCR, 1990). As women, African Americans recognized they had limited opportunities and earned lower earnings than their male family members (U.S. CCR, 1990). Byrd (2009) argued that the experiences of African American women cannot be understood by studies that only focus on women alone because this group of women is situated in an interlocking system of race and gender. In the literature, studies showed that legislation and policies played a key role in addressing the interlocking system which impacted African American women leaders (Aiken, Salmon, & Hanges, 2013; Allen & Lewis, 2016; Higginbotham, 1992; Rosser-Mims, 2010). Without legislation and policies to assist marginalized groups, such as African American women, advancement in leadership roles was an uncommon practice.

Before the enactment of civil rights legislation and affirmative action policies to create opportunities for African American women to attain leadership positions in academic, legal, and private sector organizations, African American women made some advancements into leadership positions in local community organizations, including

religious and civil rights groups (Allen & Lewis, 2016; Malveaux, 2013; Johnson, 2015). Forbes (1998) reported African American women were activists in diverse causes, predominately racial, before the Civil War. African American women joined many organizations and networked to further advance activities during the Civil War (Forbes, 1998). Allen and Lewis (2016) reported that African American women led as slavery abolitionists, and they risked their freedom and life to end slavery. In the late 19th and early 20th century, African American women led as clubwomen to oppose adverse actions and negative perceptions of African American women and to strengthen opportunities for all African Americans (Allen & Lewis, 2016). Jawando, Fry, and Wiley (2016) declared that African American women had been key leaders in policy and political movements dating back to former years of the United States to current challenges for representation and equality. These scholars recognized the African American women played a central role in leading social change for the betterment of their communities before any implementation of land policies.

DeLany and Rogers (2004) surmised that African American women attained leadership positions, not because of the power leadership afforded them but based on their responsibility to share the limited resources they had to help those most in need. The objectives for African American women were the means to achieving advocacy activities and not the leadership levels and educational levels they attained (DeLany & Rogers, 2004). Bonaparte (2015) offered a historical reflection of African American women leaders from diverse disciplines, who demonstrated transformative leadership qualities to advocate social justice. These early pioneers fighting to abolish slavery

exhibited leadership qualities during a period when African American women were being exploited by oppressive acts (Rosser-Mims, 2010). Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, and Mary McLeod Bethune exemplified core tenets of transformative leadership, which included “deconstructing and reconstructing knowledge,” “bringing about deep and equitable change,” and “demonstrating morale courage and activism” (Bonaparte, 2015, p. 2). Specifically, Jawando et al. (2016) attested that Truth and Tubman recognized their dual identities of African American women as they fought to end slavery and improve women’s rights. African American women have often had to assume leadership roles for various reasons, such as advocating for social change or fighting for the well-being of their family members and communities, because policy- and decision-making leaders, including their policies and practices, have not been proactive in addressing the needs of African American women (Jawando et al., 2016).

Gamble (2016) examined the career progression of physician-activists Drs. Dorothy Ferebee and Virginia Alexander who demonstrated how African American women leaders in the early part of the 21st century used public health to enhance the well-being of African Americans and offered insight into the experiences of African American women in health services. Ferebee became a national advocate for African American health by concentrating her leadership responsibilities in African American’s women organizations and developing public health programs (Gamble, 2016). Alexander used her religious affiliation to compel Caucasians to oppose discrimination in medicine (Gamble, 2016). These African American women used diverse leadership strategies that

combined activism, medicine, and public health, including networking throughout their careers (Gamble, 2016).

A turning point in American history was the Civil Rights Act in the mid-20th century (Aiken et al., 2013). The Civil Rights Act of 1964, which prohibits oppressive acts of injustices and discrimination related to one's race, color, religion, and national origin (Chambers, 2008), enabled women and individuals from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds to advance their knowledge, skills, and abilities and seek better employment opportunities in organizations (Aiken et al., 2013; Sked, 2014). The Civil Rights Act, reinforced by subsequent legislation and judicial decisions, changed the demographics of the American workforce (Aiken et al., 2013). Without legislation and policies to assist marginalized groups, such as African American women, advancement in leadership roles was an uncommon practice.

Even with the important progress made throughout history, considerable work to increase the representation of African American women in leadership is necessary. A small number of African American women hold leadership positions in the United States (Rahman, Shore, & Lightner-Laws, 2016). According to Jawando et al. (2016), African American women are transitioning into a variety of career opportunities and aspiring to leaders in the workplace (Jawando et al., 2016). Even though a leadership gap in senior leadership positions remains, African American women have increased their representation in managerial and professional positions in the workplace (Lebowitz, 2015), with approximately 35% of African American working women employed in management, professional, and related positions (Holmes & Frye, 2016).

African Americans in Public Health Services Workforce

In the United States, 57% of women, age 16 and older, participate in the workforce, which includes 60% African American women (United States Department of Labor [U.S. DOL], 2016). African Americans and women have worked predominantly in the public sector at a higher percentage when compared to the private sector workers (U.S. DOL, 2016). In 2015, 6% of the private sector workforce and 10% of the public sector workforce was African American women (U.S. DOL, 2016). Working in the public sector typically offers higher salaries, greater stability, and career advancement in jobs for African Americans (U.S. DOL, 2016). A key finding from a Catalyst (2004) report indicated that African American women who have lighter skin pigmentation and are less ethnic (whiter/more European in appearance) are more likely to be satisfied with salary and career advancement opportunities in comparison to African American women who have darker skin pigmentation and have a more ethnic “African” appearance.

Public sector jobs typically have a smaller wage disparity between individuals from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds (U.S. DOL, 2016). In a study conducted by Hamilton, Easley, and Dixon (2018), the researchers found that foreign-born Black women, except for Dominican and Ethiopian immigrants, have wages similar to or greater than U.S.-born Black women (Hamilton, Easley, & Dixon, 2018). Foreign-born Black women from the Dominican and Ethiopia earned lower wages than U.S.-born Black women (Hamilton et al., 2018).

Historically, employment in the public sector for African American women has garnered greater opportunities (U.S. DOL, 2016). Opportunities for upward mobility in

the public sector has benefited U.S.-born Black women in comparison to foreign-born Black women as many positions require English-speaking skills, advanced education, and, in some cases, American citizenship (Waters et al., 2014). However, according to 2013 figures, a higher percentage of foreign-born Blacks (26%), age 25 and older, have a college degree in comparison to U.S.-born Blacks (19%) (Anderson, 2015).

Organizationally, governmental public health service workers are divided amongst agencies in the federal, state, and local sectors (Jones, Banks, Plotkin, Chanthavongsa, & Walker, 2015). The public health service workforce, which is essential to protecting the health and well-being of the public, embodies professionals from a wide range of occupational backgrounds, such as health managers, physicians, nurses, environmental health specialists, and occupational health and safety officers, to name a few (Beaglehole & Dal Poz, 2003; Drehobl, Stover, & Koo, 2014). Since this study focuses on the African American women in the federal sector, the following numbers pertain to workers at this level only. In fiscal year (FY) 2016, 18.4% (359,757) of African Americans worked in the federal workforce, and of that percentage African American women represented 10.8% of the workforce during that same year (U.S. OPM, 2016a). For the past 10 years, HHS has grown consistently (U.S. OPM, 2018). The total number of federal employees in HHS in FY 2016 was 65,431 (U.S. OPM, 2018). The percentage of African Americans in HHS was 11.1%, which was up slightly by 0.2% from the previous year (U.S. OPM, 2016a).

Workforce Diversity

Much of the literature on workforce diversity combined women or separated individuals from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds into a homogenous group. Some scholars use race and ethnicity interchangeably; however, the two constructs are not synonymous (Ford & Harawa, 2010). Research focusing specifically on the need for a diverse leadership workforce to include African American women in leadership is sparse. Limited research and theory exist exploring leadership from a diversity perspective or the intersectionality of diversity and leadership (Gotsis & Grimani, 2015; Roberson, 2013). Hilliard and Boulton (2012) indicated a lack of literature exists on the diversity in the public health workforce. The authors suggested that the primary focus has been on the need to increase diversity instead of initiatives tailored to develop a diversified workforce (Hilliard & Boulton, 2012). Since a paucity of literature exists that focuses specifically on increasing racial and gender diversity in senior leadership, research related to African American women in leadership is necessary.

According to Choi and Rainey (2010), a primary issue for organizational leadership involved creating a diversified workplace. Concomitantly, a more significant concern in public organizations is the management of an increasingly diverse workforce (Choi & Rainey, 2010). Public sector organizations face challenges of managing a diverse workforce due to the extensive history of implementing diversity policies and practices designed at increasing the proportion of underrepresented groups in the workplace (Ashikali & Groeneveld, 2015; Choi & Rainey, 2010).

Equal employment opportunity (EEO) laws of the 1960s and 1970s and affirmative action (AA) programs have focused on workforce diversity and equity, which have enabled women and individuals from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds to have greater access to opportunities in the workplace (Byars-Winston, Fouad, & Wen, 2015; Choi & Rainey, 2010; Gardenswartz & Rowe, 2009). Similarly, Jin, Lee, and Lee (2017) suggested that a diversity policy represents organizational assurance in providing equal opportunities and promoting diversity. While legislative and policy efforts have shown promise, diversity in the public sector extends beyond adherence to laws enacted from the civil rights movement (Hewins-Maroney & Williams, 2013). Ashikali and Groeneveld (2015) explained the implementation of diversity management in public organizations consist of attracting, retaining, and managing diverse workforce whereby enhanced performance is the overarching goal, which differs from traditional equal employment opportunity/affirmative action policies (Ashikali & Groeneveld, 2015). The success of a strategic initiative, such as diversity policies, designed to increase the representation of individuals from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds in senior-level positions depend on the strategy's impact aimed at strengthening leadership self-perceptions and behaviors of high-potential professionals from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds (Gündemir, Dovidio, Homan, & De Drue, 2017). The promotion of a diverse leadership workforce that includes African American women in senior-level position mandates EEO and AA laws, diversity management, and leadership commitment to strategic initiatives.

The American workforce has become increasingly diversified by greater access to jobs for women and individuals from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds (Choi &

Rainey, 2010; Hewins-Maroney & Williams, 2013). While the overall numbers of women in the workforce appear solid when looking at each racial and ethnic group separately, these numbers depict something different for managing diversity and in the representation of women, specifically, women of diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds in leadership roles (Byars-Winston et al., 2015; Eagly & Chin, 2010; Hewins-Maroney & Williams, 2013). For this reason, a diverse workforce has not equated to diversity in leadership due to the underrepresentation of African American women in senior leadership positions.

In an ideal work environment, the issues of diversity would not hinder anyone's goal of becoming a senior leader; however, diversity continues to be a challenge within the higher ranks for leadership (Wilson, 2014). Wyatt and Silvester (2015) confirmed that African Americans experience greater challenges of attaining senior leadership positions when compared with their Caucasian colleagues. Within health services sector, Silver (2017) revealed the racial and gender demographics of leadership impacting policy decisions are typically both White and male leaders. The outcomes of diversity management and policies have been contingent on the membership classification, such as a member of the majority or minority group, of the decision maker (Ashikali and Groeneveld, 2015). Based on the literature, the lack of diversity in senior leadership could hinder access for African American women into this higher rank but also access to health services for individuals from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds (NCSL, 2014).

A diversified leadership team which includes people from diverse racial and ethnic background is critical. Gündermir, Dovidio, Homan, and De Dreu (2017) found

increasing the representation of people of diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds in senior leadership yields positive outcomes. Kohli, Gans, and Hairston (2011) suggested a diverse leadership workforce in the public sector will lead to better government through enhanced efficiencies, innovation, and improved effectiveness. Diversity in senior leadership enhances both the retention and utilization of skillsets of a diverse workforce. In the health services field, diversity in leadership leads to culturally competent professionals as well as influences access to health services for people of diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds (Silver, 2017). Cultural competency is learned in an environment that reflects the diversity. Having a diverse workforce, and particularly within senior leadership, yields positive outcomes for the organization and for the community.

Researchers have cited benefits of diversity in senior leadership. In the past, influential women in leadership positions contributed to increasing leadership opportunities for women (Cook & Glass, 2015). Plus, women in decision-making positions had a positive impact on the promotability and performance of women leaders (Cook & Glass, 2015). For example, they provided the pipeline for future aspiring women leader. Skaggs, Stainback, and Duncan (2012) shared this finding and acknowledged gender diversity among senior-level leadership is an essential factor in influencing gender diversity in lower-level leadership positions. The results showed a significant positive relationship between women holding board positions and gender diversity at the managerial level (Skaggs et al., 2012). Stewart (2016) contended diverse leadership fosters constructive and difficult communication which is necessary for

effective leadership. Researchers also identified that different decision-making and problem-solving skills due to diversity in leadership improve decisions through the operation of a broader range of viewpoints and a systematic assessment of issues (Ellemers & Rink, 2016; Perryman, Fernando, & Tripathy, 2016). Encouraging both women leaders and individuals from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds is crucial as organizations can retain and utilize talents of a diverse workforce, cultivate salient role models, and develop positive intergroup working relationships (Gündermir et al., 2017). Such findings underscore diversity amongst senior leadership may enhance opportunities and organizational performance.

Diversity has generated both positive and negative work-related outcomes (Ashikali & Groeneveld, 2015). Advocates of diversity have maintained that workforce diversity enhances organizational effectiveness and productivity (Choi & Rainey, 2010; Guillaume, Dawson, Woods, Sacramento, & West, 2013; Gündemir et al., 2017; Kohli et al., 2011). Kohli et al. (2011) asserted expanding senior leadership opportunities for women and individuals from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds can result in improved government operations through greater efficiencies and innovations. Several scholars suggested diversity increases creativity (Ashikali & Groeneveld, 2015; Ellemers & Rink, 2016; Galinsky et al., 2015). When diversity is managed appropriately, Choi and Rainey (2010) emphasized development, scholarship, and intuition evolve. Multiculturalism, which entails appreciating intergroup differences, can help organizations manage diversity effectively (Galinsky et al., 2015). Multiculturalism also inspires underrepresented individuals to seek opportunities (Galinsky et al., 2015).

When diversity is ignored or mismanaged, challenges and obstacles can hinder an individual and organizations ability to attain success (Gardenswartz & Rose, 2009). The lack of diversity in senior leadership can reduce access to mentors from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds for career aspiring individuals with same identities (Wilson, 2014). Ignoring diversity can create confusion and misunderstanding (Catalyst, 2016). For example, individuals who support perspectives that do not look at race or ethnicity engage in biased thoughts, which can diminish work engagement of individuals who are not in the majority (Plaut, Thomas, & Goren, 2009). Using diversity as a solution for everything can result in disappointment for many individuals as they seek career development, enhancement opportunities, and attainment of career goals (Hughes, 2014).

Cultural Competency

In the 1990s, cultural competence in health services emerged as diversity in the United States continuously burgeoned (Molinari & Shanderson, 2014). As the United States became a more diverse country, the need for health service professionals to understand this trend, have the critical skill sets to engage with individuals who are different from them, and to be culturally competent were vital (Abrishami, 2018; Hawala-Druy & Hill, 2012; Weimer & Zemrani, 2017). Chen and Starosta (1996) acknowledged that individuals must learn how to view things from the perspectives of others and include their understandings into their collection of thinking (Chen & Starosta, 1996). The authors surmised that individuals from various cultural groups who reside in the United States must learn to adapt to each other's identities as well as understand and accept cultural differences (Chen & Starosta (1996). Chen and Starosta (1998)

emphasized that the knowledge and skills of different cultures can lead to intercultural communication competence, which will become critical in a diverse society.

Specifically, a culturally competent individual will know how to engage and respond with others and achieve their communication goals by respecting, supporting, and integrating the diverse worldviews and cultural identities of others (Chen & Starosta, 1998).

The need for cultural competence is critical within the public health service sector. Kirmayer (2012) reported that in a culturally diverse society, the health services system influences the type of problems to recognize and the type of social or cultural differences that warrant attention. Kirmayer (2012) acknowledged that the purpose of cultural competence is to have health services that enhance accessibility, appropriateness, and effectiveness for individuals from diverse racial and ethnocultural backgrounds and communities. Mi and Zhang (2017) contended that cultural competency leads to a reduction and an elimination of racial and ethnic disparities in health services. Based on the importance of cultural competency, Dreachslin, Weech-Maldonado, Gail, Epané, and Wainio (2017) recommended leaders to prioritize diversity and cultural competence initiatives continuously instead of developing a one-time initiative that once implemented is no longer identified as a significant strategic priority. Similarly, Weimer and Zamrani (2017) recognized that public leaders must consider cultural competence in all phases of their organization to enhance engagement, representation, and service to individuals within their communities effectively.

The federal government published standards to promote cultural competence (Weimer & Zemrani, 2017). For example, the CLAS standards may be implemented by health service leaders (Abrishami, 2018; Molinari & Shanderson, 2014; Weimer & Zemrani, 2017). The CLAS standards recommend the employment of health service professionals are ethically like the community they serve (Molinari & Shanderson, 2014). Moreover, Abrishami (2018) reported that the fourth standard, which is aimed toward health service professionals, highlights the need to “educate, and train governance, leadership, and workforce in culturally and linguistically appropriate policies and practices on an ongoing basis” (p. 445). The CLAS standards advocate that leaders recruit and support a culturally and linguistically diverse workforce, including offering educational and training opportunities about appropriate approaches of cultural competence (Abrishami, 2018). Cultural competency needs to play a pivotal role in workplace equity and leadership development initiatives. Without cultural competence in the workplace, barriers and challenges may hinder both career development and growth.

Career Advancement Barriers or Challenges

The journey for women’s advancement into senior leadership differs in comparison to men. The pathway to senior leadership by women comes with barriers and challenges that obstruct organizational advancement (Gamble & Turner, 2015; Murray, 2016). Barriers, such as the glass ceiling (Carli & Eagly, 2016; Gamble & Turner, 2015; Wyatt & Silvester, 2015), stereotypes (Brescoll, 2016; Murray, 2016; Rahman et al., 2016), biases (Johns, 2013), and organizational impediments (Elmuti, Jia, & Dais, 2009) can encumber women’s upward mobility into senior leadership (Johns, 2013). Some

women attempt to balance work-life and family commitments while pursuing careers in leadership, which can create anxiety on the job and at home (Akpinar-Sposito, 2013; Gamble & Turner, 2015). Women often endure a labyrinth, which entails facing diverse challenges and traveling indirect paths instead of following a direct path to senior leadership (Carli & Eagly, 2016; Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010). Research from Gamble and Turner (2015) identified that advancement into senior leadership may require relocation and changes in colleagues and lifestyle including changes in relationships with friends, acquaintances as well as current and former colleagues in the organization. Career advancement has been a difficult journey for women, specifically African American women.

For African American women, the organizational challenges are consistent with those of their Caucasian women colleagues (Murray, 2016). In comparison to other racial groups, African American women face more obstructive challenges in leadership positions (Rahman et al., 2016). Due to the unique double identity of racial and gender minorities, both race- and gender-based barriers provide additional roadblocks and are fundamental challenges that influence African American women leaders and their career advancement in organizations (Murray, 2016; Rahman et al., 2018; Reynolds-Dobbs, Thomas, & Harrison, 2008). Beckwith et al. (2016) maintained that the barriers of race and gender impact not only stereotypes and perceptions of African American women leaders but also the determination African American women leaders need to attain career success. Unless strategies are identified to overcome barriers impacting African-American women and perceptions of their leadership abilities, the number of African-

American leaders will continue rise in slow intervals (Rahman et al., 2016). The intersectionality of race and gender identities present career barriers for African American women which can influence access to senior leadership.

Metaphorical Barriers

Career barriers that hinder organizational advancement of women in the workplace are multifaceted and come in several forms (Gamble & Turner, 2015). The term “glass ceiling”, a metaphor coined in 1986, characterizes invisible barriers faced by women who aspire to senior leadership positions but unable to attain them (Carli & Eagly, 2016; Gamble & Turner, 2015; Holton & Dent, 2016; Johns, 2013; Wilson, 2014; Xiang, Ingram, & Cangemi, 2017). According to Xiang, Ingram, and Cangemi (2017), women rarely attained senior leadership positions in public agencies. After many years of referencing the glass ceiling as a barrier faced by women only, this term now represents barriers that all individuals from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds face in their desire to attain senior leadership positions (Akpinar-Sposito, 2013; Wilson, 2014). Similarly, African American women often encounter a “double glass ceiling,” which denotes invisible barriers due to the duality of race and gender identities (Rahman et al., 2016).

In addition to the glass ceiling being identified as a contributing factor to the ascension women from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds to leadership positions, the “concrete ceiling” is a unique metaphor that describes barriers challenging to penetrate by African American women; the concrete ceiling signifies a career-limiting factor that affects African American’s ability to ascend the organizational ladder as well as their

ability to co-exist with others in the workforce (Beckwith et al., 2016; Johnson, 2015; Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010). The concrete ceiling applies to African American women because African American women cannot envision attaining leadership roles in their organizations (Wilson, 2014). According to Catalyst (2004), the concrete ceiling is solid and difficult to break. The foundation of these barriers includes such things as stereotypes, visibility, doubt about legitimacy and authenticity, and biases in the workplace (Catalyst, 2004).

The “labyrinth” infers that women face a challenging route throughout their careers, specifically from the time they begin mapping their route to leadership until they attain their goal (Carli & Eagly, 2016). Carli and Eagly (2016) noted that the labyrinth metaphor suggests that career ascension is a challenging but achievable endeavor. Consistent with Carli and Eagly, Wyatt and Silvester (2015) emphasized the labyrinth may have several practical routes to leadership since the journey is indicative of their efforts to understand and cope with road blocks, impediments, and dead ends encountered as well as the trying alternate routes to leadership. Hurst, Leberman, and Edwards (2016) acknowledged that women may gain experience by taking opportunity and unplanned approaches that veer from a traditional, direct, and uninterrupted career path. However, if organizational leadership does not value this career path, highly-qualified women will continue to be prevented from attaining senior leadership positions (Hurst, Leberman, & Edwards, 2016). The labyrinth enables some women to attain senior leadership, yet the walls of the labyrinth remain intact to create challenges for other women who desire a similar leadership route (Carli & Eagly, 2016). Although Carli and Eagly (2016)

suggested this metaphor does not blame women for their inability to progress or their situation, a labyrinth does, however, infer women's leadership achievement exists between the women's abilities and aspirations and the challenges of the situation. Regardless of the metaphor, African American women face a myriad of barriers and challenges in their career development.

Stereotypes

Stereotypes present problems and undermines the social identity of African American women. Even though a limited number of empirical studies appear in the literature on the implication of stereotypes and African American women in the workplace, research designed to understand stereotypes and gender roles provides a framework for understanding how stereotypes may impact the leadership development opportunities for African American women (Reynolds-Dobbs et al., 2008). Hoyt and Murphy (2016) determined many reasons for why women face difficulties in reaching senior leadership, and the primary concern includes a "lack of fit" perception that women do not have the skills and motivation necessary for effective leadership. In addition to this perception, African American women must endure historical stereotypical images (Reynolds-Dobbs et al., 2008). Historical stereotypical images include Mammy (self-sacrificing and supportive), Jezebel (seductive and flirtatious), and Sapphire (loud and overly assertive), which may influence one's perception and treatment of African American women (Holder et al., 2015; Thomas, Witherspoon & Speight, 2008). Beckwith et al. (2016) reported that historical stereotypes and challenges are today's workplace barriers impacting African American women.

The intersectionality of race and gender identities have shown to develop nuances and constraining stereotypes that impact leadership (Chin, 2013; Rosette et al., 2016). Rosette and Livingston (2012) emphasized that African American women possess two subordinate identities that are atypical of a leadership role and will be perceived most negatively when compared to African American men and Caucasian women. Reynolds-Dobbs et al. (2008) concluded that race-based stereotypes can adversely impact African American women's career and relationships with colleagues at work. For example, stereotypes, such as superwoman or crazy aggressive woman with an attitude, construct barriers for women in the workplace, particularly as they seek to attain leadership positions (Reynolds-Dobbs et al., 2008).

Rosette et al. (2016) found that distinct stereotypes are associated to African American women. Specifically, the primary stereotypes attributed to African American women are dominance, anger, and incompetence (Rosette et al., 2016). Chin (2013) noted African American women leaders are perceived as angry when they are assertive. Being stereotyped as incompetent can damage a women's leadership performance and aspirations as this attribute is a key determinant of perceptions of leadership (Carton & Rosette, 2011; Eagly & Heilman, 2016). Holder, Jackson, and Ponterotto (2015) acknowledged stereotyped such as aggressive and hostile may prevent African American women from attaining senior leadership. African American women also experience the perception of being intellectually inferior, which can undermine their credibility (Holder et al., 2015). Conversely, stereotypes which emerged from the Rosette et al. (2016) study was strong and hard-working, which describes African American women's abilities in

assisting others in achieving a goal, but not in their intellect and cognitive abilities to accomplish the goal independently. Both race-based and gender-based stereotypes play primary roles in how other perceive African American women in the workplace.

Women are subject to gender stereotypes that are perceived as unsuitable for leadership (Carli & Eagly, 2016; Kubu, 2018). Research on the characterization of gender stereotypes used to evaluate women leaders has recognized two major categories of gender stereotypes, which include communality and agency (Brescoll, 2016). In comparison to men, individuals perceive women to have communal characteristics (i.e., nurturing, sincere, kind, sensitive, caring, etc.) and less agentic characteristics (i.e., aggressive, ambitious, dominant, independent, outspoken, etc.) (Brescoll, 2016; Carli, Alawa, Lee, Zhao, & Kim, 2016; Wood & Eagly, 2015). Brescoll (2016) argued that agency is essential for leadership responsibilities. Gipson, Pfaff, Mendelsohn, Catenacci, and Burke (2017) agreed with this argument and suggested that women must determine how to demonstrate agentic characteristics considered essential for leadership without disrupting gender stereotypes. Perceptions of African American women may be impacted by their non-prototypicality of leadership (Sesko & Biernat, 2010). While the characteristics prescribed to men have been viewed positively, these attributes denote a negative connotation when prescribed to African American women.

Research findings, however, revealed African American women leaders are spared backlash for exhibiting agentic behavior. In an experiment conducted by Livingston, Rosette, and Washington (2012), dominant African American women leaders did not receive the same backlash that dominant Caucasian women leaders did. Moreover,

responses to African American women leaders showed similar patterns as Caucasian men, and both African American men and Caucasian women leaders discussed lower status when they expressed dominant rather than communality behavior (Livingston, Rosette, & Washington, 2012). While African American women may likely not suffer agentic penalties, which refers to a backlash for counter-stereotypical behavior; they may, however, experience agentic deficiency, which refers to perceptions that women have limited leadership capabilities (Rosette et al., 2016).

Evidence showed that African American women are oftentimes stereotyped as “invisible” in the workplace, meaning an absence of individualism and absence of differentiation exist between members of the group (Sesko & Biernet, 2010). Kang and Bodenhausen (2015) extended this focus describing this phenomenon as intersectional invisibility, which implies the tendency for individuals to overlook women from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds since they are perceived as a non-prototypic member of their social identity groups. For example, the prototypical African American is an African American man and the prototypical woman is a Caucasian woman; an African American woman is not considered prototypical for both her race and gender groups, and she may be overlooked (Rosette et al., 2016). In two studies conducted by Sesko and Biernet (2010), results showed that African American women go unnoticed and their voices are often not heard. In the first study, Caucasian participants were less likely to distinguish African American women from each other in comparison to other groups. In the second study, contributions of African American women were more likely confused

with other African American women and other groups; however, African American women were associated with identified errors (Sesko & Biernat, 2010).

Rosette et al. (2016) assumed that African American women may experience positive and negative consequences by being invisible. For example, invisibility can shield African American women from racial prejudice in comparison to African American men and Caucasian women as well as cause African American women to suffer repercussions (Rosette et al., 2016). In the Silver (2017) study, healthcare leaders from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds described the lack of visibility as a barrier to career attainment. The research participants suggested being visible provided them with opportunities to demonstrate their abilities in a manner that be observed by senior leaders who have decision-making responsibilities in hiring and promoting other senior leaders within the organization (Silver, 2017). As a result, invisibility may adversely impact African American women aspiration into senior leadership since they may be overlooked.

Biases

Stereotypes and biases, which cause misunderstandings and misinterpretations, create subtle but formidable barriers for women (AAUW, 2016; Wilson, 2014). Handelsman and Sakraney (2015) reported biases cause disruption when individuals evaluate others through a biased lens and when individuals are evaluated based on stereotypical perceptions. Former empirical studies established a pattern of findings whereby leadership bias favors Caucasians. In four experimental studies conducted by Gündemir, Homan, Carsten, de Drue, & van Vugt (2014), the findings determined that individuals typically associate leadership attributes with Caucasians instead of

individuals from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds. These findings highlighted why individuals from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds are underrepresented in senior leadership position (Gündemir, Homan, Carsten, de Drue, & van Vugt, 2014). In earlier studies conducted by Rosette, Leonardelli and Phillips (2008), the researchers posited that a central characteristic of leadership is “being White” and that evaluators will perceive Caucasian leaders as the prototype of leadership than leaders from other racial and ethnic backgrounds. The results indicated that the characteristics of a leadership prototype is a Caucasian (Rosette, Leonardelli, & Phillips, 2008). In a study conducted by Carlton and Rosette (2011), their analyses showed bias against African American leaders occurred in the evaluation process, and that they are not evaluated in the same manner to Caucasian leaders. According to evaluators, African American leaders fail due to incompetence and succeed due to possessing compensatory non-leadership attributes, such as calculating, controlling, humorous, and relational (Carlton & Rosette, 2011). The evidence from these studies indicated that racial bias against African American leaders plays a critical role in obstructing career advancement in organizations.

Gender bias continues to plague women from attaining a leadership position, and once they ascend the leadership ladder, their difficulties do not cease (Vial, Napier, & Brescoll, 2016). Vial, Napier, and Brescoll (2016) posited the challenges women leaders endure derive from low legitimacy perceptions, meaning in comparison to men, individuals may not perceive women leaders as legitimate authorities. Holt and Simon (2016) supported this hypothesis by suggesting social identities, such as gender and race, influence one’s perceptions of a leader prototype. Rahman et al. (2016) explained that

the United States has made negligible progress toward enhancing the gender disparities in leadership roles and that considerable work needs to be accomplished to eliminate gender bias.

Implicit biases. Research has shown implicit bias leads to adverse implications for African American women (Avery, McKay, Volpone, & Malka, 2015; Gündemir et al., 2014; Williams, 2014). Handelsman and Sakraney (2015) concluded that unconscious, implicit assumptions can formulate one's judgment and perception of other individuals. Implicit bias derives from expectations or negative assumptions about individuals' physical or social identities determined by stereotypes based on characteristics, such as race, ethnicity, and gender (Handelsman & Sakraney, 2015). Implicit biases can promote negative thoughts and beliefs, as well as influence damaging stereotypical behaviors, which may impact hiring decisions, retention, and promotion opportunities of women (Jackson, Hilliard, & Schneider, 2014). Saul (2013) indicated that even those individuals who acknowledge egalitarian perspectives have expressed implicit biases against such groups as African Americans and women. The United States Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (U.S. EEOC) (2013) determined an implicit bias that African Americans do not possess leadership capabilities to perform senior leadership responsibilities is a contributing factor to the underrepresentation of African American women in senior leadership positions in the public sector.

Avery, McKay, Volpone, and Malka (2015) contended that race identity is the fundamental characteristic of many individuals' implicit perception of leaders. In the U.S., most prominent leaders have been Caucasians (Avery et al., 2015). According to

the American Association of University Women (2016), most Americans typically associate positively with Caucasians and negativity with African Americans. Studies using the Implicit Association Test revealed that most individuals associate men to science fields, having careers, and being leaders, whereas individuals associate women to humanities, homemakers, and being supporters, respectively (AAUW, 2016). Sullivan-Bisset (2015) indicated that implicit bias may affect one's attitudes and how he or she perceives the world. Bellack (2015) noted that implicit bias yields obstacles to cultural competence. The journey for African American women to attain senior leadership demands career advancement strategies and facilitators to break down the barriers and challenges they face in their organizations.

Career Advancement Strategies and Facilitators

African American women have faced problems and unique challenges in the workforce, which have inspired them to develop strategies to aid other women in breaking through barriers and addressing challenges that have hindered their growth and progress in their organizations (Davis, 2009). Stewart (2016) noted that organizations could take several initiatives to develop their pipeline and ensure the availability of career opportunities for women, particularly African American women, to enhance their leadership skills. The research suggested that mentoring, networking, and sponsorship make a difference to women and individuals from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds who are not considered a majority group in leadership (Benschop, Holgersson, van den Brink, & Wahl, 2015; Downs, Reif, Hokororo, & Fitzgerald, 2015; Gamble & Turner, 2015; Hague & Okpala, 2017; Hurst et al., 2016). For example, Gamble and Turner

(2015) advocated for women securing a mentor and engaging in networking opportunities in order to break through the glass ceiling. Similarly, Beckwith, Carter, and Peters (2016) acknowledged that mentor and sponsorship are essential relationships for African American women leaders to help them in their effectiveness and to eliminate career barriers related to being in the minority regarding their race and gender in the leadership role. In the study conducted by Holder et al. (2015), African American women leaders reported that mentors and sponsors enabled them to feel empowered and validated their existence when they coped with racial disparity in the workplace. While these strategies have proven successful, the U.S. EEOC (2013) reported that the lack of suitable mentoring and networking opportunities for higher level leadership positions is an obstacle African Americans face in the workplace. This section addresses the noted strategies as well as offer additional strategies and facilitators, such as executive coaching and leadership training and development opportunities which can prove beneficial to the career advancement of African American women.

Mentorship

Leck and Orser (2013) conducted an exploratory qualitative study and identified mentoring as a key component in the career development and career advancement for women. The researchers interviewed 24 mentors who had over 20 years of work experience and held senior leadership positions in both the private and public sectors (Leck & Orser, 2013). The researchers highlighted that trust helps build a mentor/protégé relationship (Leck & Orser, 2013). The female participants indicated that they established greater trust with their female protégé since they were rarely included in

male networks; male participants revealed that sharing information with emotional female protégés was an uncomfortable experience (Leck & Orser, 2013). The conclusion from this literature review indicated that establishing rapport between the mentor and protégé can foster a positive relationship.

Stewart (2016) emphasized that a mentor, having already “walked the walk,” can guide aspiring leaders on how they can maneuver and climb the organizational ladder (p. 62). The mentor can share work experiences to help facilitate the protégé in overcoming obstacles they may have encountered trying to maneuver the climb independently (Stewart, 2016). Silver (2017) interviewed 24 healthcare executives, and all indicated that mentors helped to facilitate their career attainment, and most executives, predominately from a diverse racial and ethnic background, affirmed they benefited from a significant mentor. Silver (2017) identified a formalized mentoring program as a critical tool in enhancing the diversity of senior leadership teams. Khalid, Rehman, Muqadas, and Rehman (2017) conducted an exploratory qualitative study and interviewed professional Pakistani women holding leadership positions. A major theme emerging from the study was the importance of mentoring (Khalid, Rehman, Muqadas, and Rehman, 2017). Specifically, the participants conveyed that a mentoring relationship cannot be avoided regarding career development of women and that a negative mentor relationship can have an adverse effect on one’s career (Khalid et al., 2017).

In addition to assisting protégés in achieving career success, mentors can help others become cognizant of obstacles, determine the problems to address, which could hinder their goal of breaking the glass ceiling, and demonstrate leadership potential

(Wilson, 2014). In the study conducted by Chin, Desormeaux, and Sawyer (2016), participants, who were leaders from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds, reported mentoring as a two-fold process whereby leaders from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds can attain support and guidance in a safe environment and the leader's responsibility to provide mentoring relationships to others who aspire career development and growth. Once career success was attained, senior leaders saw the importance of mentoring other individuals. For example, an African American executive who was previously mentored by an African American CEO made time to mentor other African American colleagues in the workplace as well as other from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds (Chin, Desormeaux, & Sawyer, 2016). Findings from these studies reveal that mentoring relationships can serve as a mechanism to developing oneself and advancing within the workplace, but also, in turn, to valuing the importance of mentorship and assisting other individuals who aspire career development and advancement.

For African American women, inconsistent results were obtained regarding if mentoring relationships played a major role in their leadership experiences. In Tran's (2014) qualitative study that explored the mentoring relationships of women leaders from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds in higher education, four themes describing the mentoring experiences included: "(a) mentoring is not always visible, (b) mentoring is a constant, (c) mentoring is self-initiated, and (d) mentoring is multidimensional" (p. 306). While women leaders from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds had different

mentoring experiences, they acknowledged that a mentoring relationship was influential in their professional success (Tran, 2014).

In a study conducted by Bonaparte (2016), African American women leaders in the pharmaceutical industry confirmed that mentoring was an integral component of their career ascension into leadership. These African American women leaders further acknowledged that, in addition to having a mentor, they embraced the opportunity and obligation to serve as mentors to aspiring African American women leaders (Bonaparte, 2016). Murray (2016) suggested that for women, particularly African American women, the beneficial outcomes of mentoring relationships can contribute to development and success in the workplace. The researcher explored workplace experiences and relationships of African American women leaders who advanced into senior leadership position in their organizations (Murray, 2016). Participants acknowledged that support and guidance from mentors can enhance self-confidence of their abilities and empower them to demonstrate their full capabilities (Murray, 2016). In addition, understanding that other leaders in the organization care about the interest of African American women could enhance both personal and organizational morale (Murray, 2016). Mentoring relationships can aid African American women in penetrating informal networks, which can thereby aid them in breaking concrete ceilings (Murray, 2016).

In contrast, Robinson and Nelson's (2010) narrative study of six African American women leaders from diverse socioeconomic, educational, and professional backgrounds, the participants cited they did not receive any assistance from women mentors and did not believe mentors were a prerequisite for becoming a successful

professional. The mixed results in studies of African American women leaders may lie in the likelihood that not all African American women leaders perceive mentorship as a career advancement strategy.

Networks

Career advancement has been limited for individuals from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds due to their inability to access formal and informal networks, which are critical to success (Bell & Nkomo, 2003; Blake-Beard, 1999). In response to the needs of employees traditionally classified as marginalized groups, organizations established formal networks (Catalyst, 2006). Combs (2003) and Ibarra (1993) characterized formal networks as more prescribed connections among and between organizational employees arising from an organizational hierarchy, such as the organizational charts, leadership/employee relationships, standing committees and advisory councils, and designated authoritative figures.

Most of the research about the outcomes of networking at the individual level focused on a common perception that well-connected employees will have positive career and development experiences in comparison to individuals who are not connected (Gibson, Hardy, & Buckley, 2014). At the individual level, Gibson, Hardy, and Buckley (2014) reported that the outcomes of networking could lead to greater visibility and authority; at the organizational level, the outcomes of networking could enhance job performance and strategic information outcomes, which may be of organizational benefit. In an earlier study conducted by O'Neil, Hopkins, and Sullivan (2011), executives shared a similar belief that networks will encourage women to pursue more visible leadership

roles in the organization. Individuals during that same study, members of the women's network, believed networks could enhance one's career progression, increase the number of women leaders, and provide additional networking and skill development opportunities (O'Neil, Hopkins, & Sullivan, 2011). Holton and Dent (2016) identified key factors which contribute to a successful career development process for women. Participants expressed the importance of networks and networking, including the value of online networking options such as Facebook and LinkedIn (Holton & Dent, 2016). The literature highlighted the that networks could provide positive benefits for both the individual and the organization.

Research showed that networks construct a supportive structure for African American women in their career progression. Stewart (2016) reported that the development of networks provides supportive opportunities for employees from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds who face similar challenges. Specifically, African American women can receive support for the issues and challenges they face in the workplace through networks. Davis and Maldonado (2015) concluded that aspiring African American women leaders "must be willing to step outside their comfort zones to establish a network of people who are different from them" and who are in higher level leadership positions (p. 60). Semoamadi (2016) concluded that African American women in the public sector need to include networking as a key strategy for career advancement in the workplace. Sanchez-Hucles and Davis (2010) suggested that women must develop positive networking experiences with both genders to navigate their career path. Kubu (2018) corroborated Sanchez-Hucles and Davis suggestion by emphasizing

the importance of aspiring leaders including men in their network. Establishing formal networks with a diverse group of leaders may facilitate the leadership journey of aspiring African American women leaders.

Alternatively, work-related informal networks can be characterized as groups of individuals, such as family members, friends and associates, and other contacts who one has developed personal relationships and who one may turn to for help on work-related issues (Catalyst, 2006). These networks can lead to high visibility assignments, which are often facilitated by personal relationships with influential individuals, and these assignments can help the employee cultivate essential skills and abilities (Catalyst, 2006). The Catalyst (2006) study reported that African American women utilized a “sticking together” strategy whereby they formed networks with those of the same racial/ethnic background or gender. This strategy had a positive correlation to the promotion rate for African American women (Catalyst, 2006). This finding suggested that the success of African American women in the workplace can occur without being accepted as an insider within the organization (Catalyst, 2006).

Informal networks are mechanisms for providing information and feedback, which are essential to the advancement and successes of one’s career (Combs, 2003; Senoamadi, 2016), and opportunity for informal learning (Cross & Armstrong, 2008). Access to informal networks provides deeper understandings on informal and undocumented responsibilities as well as organizational values (Holder et al., 2015). For African American women leaders, gaining access to these networks is central to their success for higher level positions and increased earning power (Combs, 2003). Ely,

Ibarra, and Kolb (2011) asserted that informal networks could lead to leadership opportunities, determine who will visualize and endorse leadership claims, and cultivate one's learning process, and shape career trajectories.

Sponsorship

Carbajal (2018) indicated that for women to ascend the organizational ladder, sponsorship is important. Sponsors in senior leadership positions can mediate for employees, guide their career ascension better than other individuals, and help women develop their knowledge, skills, and abilities (Carbajal, 2018; Holton & Dent, 2016; Travis, Doty, & Helitzer, 2013). Aspiring leaders will hit a concrete ceiling if they try to ascend the organizational ladder without a sponsor (Carbajal, 2018).

In a survey conducted by Giscombe and Mattis (2002), 44% of the participants cited that having influential mentor and sponsor as a key factor to career advancement. However, 47% of the participants acknowledged that not having an influential mentor or sponsor was a major barrier that hindered them from advancing within their organization (Giscombe & Mattis, 2002). The study participants were women from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds working in 30 Fortune 1000 organizations (Giscombe & Mattis, 2002). In the study conducted by Sexton, Lemak and Wainio (2014) to explore the career trajectories of female healthcare executives, several participants attributed their career achievement of attaining a hospital chief executive officer (CEO) position to the hospital's chief operating officer and CEO, who served as mentors and sponsors during their professional training. Stewart (2016) claimed sponsorship goes beyond mentoring in that the sponsor is more likely aware of and can provide access to opportunities that

the employee may not have otherwise had the privilege of having without the sponsor. Individuals who do not develop mentorship or sponsorship relationships may be at a greater disadvantage or endure slower progression towards career advancement (Crawford & Smith, 2005).

African American women aspiring to leadership positions face unique challenges in finding a sponsor (AAUW, 2016; Beckwith et al., 2016). Research showed that African American women had developed mentorship and strong networking relationships, but lack sponsors (Marshall & Wingfield, 2016). For African American women, sponsorship remains a key factor in job satisfaction and achieving career success (Sherbin & Rashid, 2017). When sponsorship occurred, the outcomes proved beneficial. For example, Davis and Maldonado (2015) revealed that “sponsorship from the unexpected” significantly contributed to their career advancement to leadership (p. 58). Holder et al. (2015) confirmed that sponsors could play a major role in influencing the degree to which African American women are perceived as competent, which is particularly important for African American women considering the negative stereotype of incompetent often given to them.

Executive Coaching

In addition to mentorship and sponsorship discussed previously, coaching is considered good techniques organization can utilize to develop a pipeline of African American women. Evidence showed that coaching is as beneficial to women as mentorship (Clarke, 2011). According to Travis, Doty, and Helitzer (2013), coaching starts where mentoring concludes, and both relationships are private, individualized

engagements. Stewart (2016) emphasized coaching can help African American women increase self-efficacy and recognize career obstacles and challenges including techniques to overcome them. A coaching relationship can aid high-potential aspiring leaders in identifying their authentic leadership style, developing their leadership potential, and creating a career plan that will guide them achieving senior leadership positions (Stewart, 2016). Since women are underrepresented in leadership positions, there are limited empirical studies available on the executive coaching of women leaders (O'Neil, Hopkins, & Bilimoria, 2015). The scant empirical studies obtained in the literature revealed the benefit and outcomes of executive coaching.

Many organizations are employing executive coaches as a developmental tool for the senior and high-potential leaders to garner positive outcomes of their professionals as well as organization-wide transformation (Feldman & Lankau, 2005; Hopkins, O'Neil, Passarelli, & Bilmoria, 2008). Reinhold (2005) advocated that coaching relationships can help aspiring female leaders in the following manner: (a) grow competently; (b) train how to navigate the organizational landscape; (c) develop essential leadership skills, such as organizational awareness and political savvy; and (d) become aware of own individuality. Similar to Reinhold's assertion, O'Neil, Hopkins, and Bilmoria (2015) concluded executive coaching could help women to address their developmental needs in the context of their identified situations by presenting examples related to an area of focus and asking coaching questions. While many women in leadership positions may face different issues as they seek to establish their leadership presence, coaching is a

helping relationship tailored to the individual and not a *one size fits all* endeavor (O'Neil et al., 2015).

Leadership Training and Development

Carbajal (2018) reported that work experience and work exposure are key advancement strategies in becoming leaders. Work exposure can include leadership-type seminars and leadership training (Carbajal, 2018), which can prepare aspiring leaders for future opportunities. Stewart (2016) acknowledged that leadership development training allows aspiring leaders to develop and hone their leadership skills, particularly soft skills such as communication, emotional intelligence, motivating and managing others, and planning and organizations. According to U.S. OPM (2017), federal employees can participate in leadership development programs, such as those offered at the Federal Executive Institute and the Management Development Centers, to further develop their leadership skills and competencies needed to address the executive core qualifications. Kubu's (2018) literature review to identify potential rationales for the gender gap in leadership, the author explained that aspiring leaders should take advantage of leadership opportunities that may appear to stretch themselves, demonstrating a clear indication of one's desire to serve in leadership which may potentially lead to other leadership opportunities. The researcher concluded that leadership opportunities do not happen automatically; an aspiring leader must seek leadership opportunities to enhance their abilities and skill sets (Kubu, 2018), which can provide them additional advantage in their pursuit of career advancement.

Beeson and Valerio (2012) suggested that women should manage their careers by pursuing necessary executive experience and collaborate with their leaders to identify initiatives and projects they can lead in their current position to help demonstrate necessary leadership skills. The researchers recommended women to pursue high-profile projects and task forces that increase their visibility to a broad range of senior leaders (Beeson & Valerio, 2012). In an earlier study, Hopkins, O'Neil, Passarelli, and Bilmoria (2008) asserted that the top career development strategy for women in the healthcare organizations was seeking challenging and high-profile assignments. In 2010, research by McKinsey and Company found that leadership development strategies should be designed that aid women in developing essential leadership skills, recognizing and leveraging their strengths, and becoming risk takers and self-confident (Johns, 2013). Johns (2013) recommended leadership development strategies should offer women with the necessary tools and approaches for avoiding barriers and challenges. Leadership development strategies can prepare aspiring African American leaders with the essential knowledge, skills, and abilities necessary to assume higher-level responsibilities.

Leadership Development and Career Ascension of African American Women

Women face unique leadership challenges, which are not recognized by others routinely (Hopkins et al., 2008). Therefore, it is critical that leadership development initiatives are advanced to address specific needs for women (Hopkins et al., 2008). The career development of women and men differ from one another, and women require alternative support (Thomas, Bierema, & Landeau, 2004). Limited support to address the unique developmental needs of women, particularly African American women, has

occurred (Thomas et al., 2004). Evidence in research showed that the marginalization of African American women is particularly poignant in the realm of leadership development throughout various organizations.

In a qualitative study conducted by Davis and Maldonado (2015) to explore intersectionality of race and gender identities for African American in their leadership development in the academic field, findings revealed that, with the support of a mentor and/or sponsor, African American women who demonstrated certain leadership skills could ascend their organizational ladder. Leadership skills identified that helped advance African American women participants into senior-level roles included integrity, interpersonal characteristics, resilience, and social skills (Davis & Maldonado, 2015). Davis and Maldonado (2015) acknowledged that organizations atypically create a supportive environment that encourages the leadership development and advancement of highly skilled and talented African American women to attain leadership positions. Possessing essential leadership attributes and establishing strategic relationship are invaluable tools for African American women to attain senior leadership positions. In addition, work environments that foster the development and advancement are essential.

African American women have experienced both positive and negative outcomes in their pursuit of career advancement. Hague and Okpala's (2017) qualitative study examined the leadership experiences of 12 African American women leaders in North Carolina community college institutions. The participants described their leadership experiences and the factors that impacted their career advancement, which included mentorship and networking relationships, work experiences, and professional leadership

development to the race and gender identity impacting their leadership, discrimination, and mentoring (Hague & Okpala, 2017). The findings showed that a variation exists between the participant's leadership experiences, and the variations may be attributed to the following three factors: (a) participant's age, (b) number of years in leadership positions, and (c) education level (Hague & Okpala, 2017). Hague and Okpala (2017) concluded that the factors impacting African American women from attaining leadership positions included race and gender identities, leadership preparation, mentorship and networking relationships, as well as relationship building with key stakeholders. Similarly, in the quantitative study conducted by Key et al. (2012), where women, including women from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds, working in public and private organizations were sampled, African American women revealed that they did not receive much career assistance and support with their development and ascension in organizations where they were employed. The studies suggested that African American female participants experienced less encouragement from both male and female leaders to succeed and advance in comparison of Caucasian women (Key et al., 2012). Evidence from these studies indicated that the duality of race and gender might play a factor in the development and career ascension of African American women.

Research described both individual and organizational facilitators that can impact the leadership development of African American women. Adesaogun, Flottemesch, and Ibrahim-DeVries (2015) conducted a qualitative study exploring the experiences of 30 African American women working in the nonprofit industry in Minnesota, including the strategic communication tactics these women utilized to achieve career advancement in

the nonprofit organizations in which they worked. Adesaogun et al. (2015) argued that African American women who achieve career success by attaining leadership positions may feel obligated to attain leadership positions to change their presentation significantly to effectively navigate the hierarchical structures in their organizations.

The findings revealed several strategic tools used by aspiring African American women to achieve higher-level leadership positions (Adesaogun, Flottemesch, & Ibrahim-DeVries, 2015). Two key themes identified by the participants included: (a) “be present” - volunteering for opportunities that will provide access to individuals and situations people and (b) “invest in education”- seeking out additional training to enhance individual skills were key identified by the participants (Adesaogun et al., 2015, pp. 54-55). The participants cited education as a strategic tactic, which strengthens the notion that individuals from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds must have advanced education to be viewed as having equal qualifications as men and Caucasian women (Adesaogun et al., 2015).

From an organizational perspective, Gamble and Turner’s (2015) study explored the life experiences, career development, and ascension factors for 10 African American women at the executive leadership level in college institutions in the state of Georgia. The researchers opined that the development of diverse mentorship and leadership programs would help aspiring leaders by exposing them to individuals from diverse cultures and backgrounds. The researchers recommended that organizations should regulate professional development that emphasizes diversity can help create an inclusive leadership workforce (Gamble & Turner, 2015). In the federal sector, an OPM-approved

training and development program, such as the Senior Executive Service Candidate Program, can aid agency leaders in identifying and preparing future senior leaders (U.S. OPM, 2017).

Kubu (2018) emphasized that leadership development is a collaborative process that requires thoughtful and deliberate practices. *A one size fits all* approach cannot be utilized for the leadership development of women, particularly, African American women. The career trajectory for women differ from men in that women have more career interruptions, change careers, and experience a labyrinth career path (Thomas et al., 2004). The duality of race and gender identities have a double impact on the leadership development of aspiring African American women leaders. When organizations do not recognize the leadership differences, the development of aspiring women leaders can occur in the wrong manner (Vanderbroeck, 2010), resulting in the underrepresentation of women in senior leadership positions.

Summary and Conclusions

Chapter 2 included a review of the literature that helped gain a deeper understanding of the underrepresentation of African American women in leadership. The career advancement for African American women differ from Caucasians and African American men. African American women leaders are more likely to adversely endure experiences from the effects of racial and gender acts of oppression, while Caucasian men and women have positive experiences of racial privilege (Parker & Ogilvie, 1996). The literature review began with the theoretical frameworks, intersectionality and SCCT. The literature review also included historical perspectives of African American women

leaders, the public health service workforce, workforce diversity, cultural competency, barriers and challenges to career advancement, and strategies and facilitators for career advancement. The chapter concluded with a review of the leadership development and career ascension of African American women leaders.

Research has shown African American women are underrepresented in senior leadership positions, and a diverse leadership workforce has positive effects in both the work environment and community. Although African American women face challenges and barriers as they aspire to senior leadership positions, strategies can help facilitate their career advancement within their organization. For African American women, the impracticability of exploring their dual social identities into a single understanding of race or gender, for example, means that these factors must all be explored concurrently; understanding their lived experiences cannot be extrapolated through the lens of other groups (Allen & Lewis, 2016). The unknown that remains is how the duality of race and gender factors impacts the career advancement of African American women leaders in a public health service agency. Limited attention has focused on the experiences of individuals in these intersections in the workplace (Aiken et al., 2013).

This study aimed to generate information that would help increase the understanding of African American women leaders. Findings from selected literature showed a need to enhance knowledge about the lived experiences and perceptions of African American women in diverse work environments, such as a public health service agency. This study will fill a gap in knowledge by providing current research on the lived experiences of African American women in leadership in public health service.

Providing research about the career advancement of African American women in leadership may be helpful to agency leaders and key decision-makers that aim to support a diverse workforce and seek to develop strategies that promote the career advancement of African American women.

Chapter 3 includes an in-depth discussion of the research methodology that will be used for this present study. The chapter contains a detailed description of the research design, rationale for the appropriateness of the design choice, the role of the researcher, elements of the selected methodology, issues of trustworthiness, and a summary.

Chapter 3: Research Method

Introduction

The purpose of this transcendental, phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences and perceptions of African American women in their career advancement to senior leadership positions in a health service agency of HHS in the United States. The study design centered on the intersectionality of race and gender that contributed to the career advancement of African American women leaders into a GS-15 and SES leadership position in HHS.

This chapter includes the research design and rationale, my role as researcher, methodology, issues of trustworthiness, ethical procedures, and the summary.

Research Design and Rationale

I used the following three research questions to guide this study:

RQ1: What are the lived experiences of African American women who have attained a senior leadership position in a federal health service agency within HHS?

RQ2: What are the perceptions of African American women who have attained a senior leadership position in a federal health service agency with HHS?

RQ3: In what ways did the intersection of race and gender contribute to the leadership experiences of African American women in senior leadership roles?

I chose a qualitative transcendental phenomenological research design to determine how the intersectionality of race and gender influenced the career development of African American women who attained senior leadership positions within a health

service agency in HHS. A researcher uses a qualitative research method to explore and understand the meanings in which individuals ascribe to social or human problems and when the social or human problem need a comprehensive understanding (Creswell, 2014; Patton, 2015; Sutton & Austin, 2015). A qualitative approach helps to explain how individuals participate in meaning making, which involves gaining a deeper understanding of the world (Patton, 2015). Researchers choose a qualitative approach when they want to understand how individuals cope in their real-world environment (Yin, 2016). In quantitative research, judgment takes place at the population level and relies on statistics and numbers; in qualitative research, judgment takes place at the conceptual level and relies on words and rich descriptions (Davidsen, 2013).

A phenomenological approach allows the researcher to explore the lived experiences of study participants and to stay away from assumptions; accordingly, the researcher relies on the participants' responses (Moustakas, 1994). A phenomenological approach enables the study participants to describe how they orient their lived experiences through first-person narratives in an interview format (Gentles, Charles, Ploeg, & McKibbin, 2015; Sloan & Bowe, 2014). A researcher can likely acquire comprehensive, in-depth information about a specific population (Mertens, 2015). Previous researchers (see Bonaparte, 2016; Davis & Maldonado, 2015; Gamble & Turner, 2015) have used a qualitative phenomenological approach extensively for research studies of this nature. I used a phenomenological approach whereby women who self-identify as African American leaders can share their experiences and perspectives and provide rich descriptions in a health service environment.

The founder of phenomenology, Edmund Husserl, developed transcendental phenomenology (Chan, Fung, & Chien, 2013; Davidsen, 2013; McConnell-Henry, Chapman, & Francis, 2009). A transcendental phenomenological design allows the researchers to put assumptions in abeyance that they may have in relations to the research questions, also termed epoché (McConnell-Henry et al., 2009). With transcendental phenomenology, the researcher emerges without having any preconceived beliefs of the phenomenon (Matua & Van Der Wal, 2015).

Role of Researcher

As a qualitative researcher, I had several roles of responsibilities in conducting my research study. The researcher is involved in all phases of the qualitative study from defining a concept to design, interviewing study participants, transcribing and analyzing the data, verifying results, and reporting the concepts and themes ((Sanjari, Bahramnezhad, Formani, Shoghi, & Cheraghi, 2014). Creswell (2014) stated the primary role of the researcher is to act as the key instrument. Therefore, I served as participant-observer in the data collection process. I recruited potential women who self-identified as African American in senior leadership positions who meet the selection criteria, and I recruited potential study participants by face-to-face conversations, email, and phone, and I asked them to participate in a face-to-face or Skype video interview, which will be audio recorded. I collected rich, in-depth data from the study participants during the in-depth, semistructured interviews. Semistructured interviews include several pre-determined areas of interest with possible probing questions to help guide the discussion (Petty, Thomson, & Stew, 2012), but not lead the study participants to give a specific

response. Field notes help to supplement audio recorded interviews (Sutton & Austin, 2015). The researcher takes field notes during the interview process to maintain and annotate observations about the environmental contexts, researcher behavior, and nonverbal cues that may not be depicted from the audio recording accurately (Sutton & Austin, 2015). The role of the researcher is to explore the thoughts and feelings of study participants (Sutton & Austin, 2015). A fundamental role I played in the phenomenological study was to transform data from the lived experiences of the study participants.

Through the data collection process, I brought individual experiences into texts and gain a deeper understanding of those experiences from participant statements. During the next phase, I categorized the statements into themes. Finally, the last phase entails documenting, in writing, the essence of the lived experiences, which results in a complete and detailed account of the phenomenon (Sanjari et al., 2014).

I am a woman who identifies as an African American and was born in the United States. I hold a senior leadership position in my organization. I may have known some of the women leaders I recruited for the study, and I may have had a professional relationship with them because some study participants may be colleagues. However, none of the study participants I recruited for the study worked directly in my immediate office and were no supervisor-subordinate relationships. Many study participants hold equal or higher-level positions and work in other field or headquarters offices within the health service agency.

In my role as the researcher and interviewer, as well as an African American woman in a senior leadership position who may potentially share the participant's experiences, I employed measures in the methodology that will inhibit me from interjecting researcher bias or personal views and assumptions that could impact the study participants' responses to the interview questions. In phenomenological analysis, the researcher set aside bias and personal opinions of this study. As noted previously, the epoché process assisted me in separating personal experience from the experiences of the study participants. Moustakas (1994) emphasized that epoché is the first step in coming to see how things are without any biases and prejudices.

I selected the qualitative phenomenological approach that entails epoché to help identify researcher bias and assumptions that could potentially hinder me from approaching this study from a non-biased perspective. Along with epoché, bracketing requires the researcher to hold into abeyance any knowledge and experience about the topic before and throughout the phenomenological investigation (Chan et al., 2013).

I used a journal during the research process. A journal aids the researcher in annotating thoughts and feelings that might impact the research process (Chan et al., 2013). This set-aside process enabled me to focus on the attaining new knowledge and experiences of the phenomenon. Lastly, the likelihood of researcher bias was reduced by actively engaging the study participants in checking and verifying the results through member checking (Birt, Scott, Cavers, Campbell, & Walter, 2016).

Because I may have a professional relationship with study participants, I did not introduce any influencing factors or biases. I did not offer any incentives for

participation in the research study. The rationale for not providing any incentives was based on study participants serving in leadership positions in the federal government, and many are subject to restrictions on incentives they may be offered. In addition, due to my senior leadership position and authority, I did not want an incentive offer to appear coercive in any manner. To protect the confidentiality and anonymity of the study participants, I did not include any personal or identifying data regarding their identification. Demographic data was only obtained.

Methodology

Participant Selection

The target population of this research study was anyone who self-identified as an African American woman leader in the targeted health service agency in HHS. The sampling unit was African American women who hold senior leadership positions in the organization within the continental United States, including both field and headquarter offices. The definition of senior leadership for this research study included individuals who hold leadership positions at the GS-15 and SES level serving in roles such as senior advisor, district director, program division director, laboratory director, deputy director, program director, office director, or equivalent.

Sampling strategy and criteria. Since a limited number of African American women senior leaders work in the public health service agency, I chose a purposive sampling approach as it will allow me to engage African American women who meet the selection criteria and have firsthand knowledge and experience in career advancement to senior leadership positions. Purposive sampling is commonly used in qualitative methods

and focuses on selecting information-rich study participants who can offer insight and in-depth understanding of the research questions (Gentles et al., 2015; Patton, 2015).

Purposive sampling strategies include nonrandom approaches for selecting study participants (Richie Lewis, Nicholls, & Ormston, 2014; Robinson, 2014). Specifically, I applied a snowball sampling technique to recruit study participants. The snowball technique begins with one or a few key information-rich study participants, and these individuals provide contact information for other potential study participants who could be good sources of information for the study (Patton, 2015). The snowball sampling technique enabled African American women in senior leadership positions to recommend other African American women leaders who work within the health service agency that might be willing to participate in this study.

To participate in this study, participants were required to meet specific criteria. Study participants had to be a woman who identified as both African American and a female, and who currently served in a senior leadership position in the health service agency. Study participants had to work either in the headquarters office in the Washington, DC metropolitan area or one of the field offices located within the continental United States. Study participants who met the selection criteria were recruited via email. Once initial contact was made, I sought permission to contact them privately and followed up with the participant via a telephone call. During the telephone conversation, I explained the purpose and nature of the study.

Sample size. For a qualitative research approach, small sample size offers significant discoveries in acquiring information that may be useful for understanding the

phenomenon of interest, (Gentles et al., 2015; Patton, 2015). Creswell (2013) acknowledged that quality and not quantity is an essential component in a qualitative study. For phenomenological approaches, Creswell (2014) suggested that studies range from three to 10 participants. Similar qualitative phenomenological studies that explored the underrepresentation of African American recruited small sample size in their studies. For example, Davis and Maldonado (2015) interviewed five participants. Similarly, Bonaparte (2016) interviewed eight African American women leaders in the pharmaceutical industry. In the Holder et al. (2015) study, the researchers conducted semistructured interviews with 10 African American women who held senior leadership positions in the private sector. Based on this information, I proposed a target sample size of eight African American women to participate in the study. Without a provisional number at the design phase, the time and necessary resources to conduct the research study cannot be ascertained, and that may hinder the planning process (Robinson, 2014).

Saturation is the predominant concept for sample size for qualitative research approaches, and researchers typically make decisions related to the adequacy of their sample based on this concept (Malterud, Siersma, & Guassora, 2016; O'Reilly & Parker, 2013). Because researchers utilize a small sample size when conducting a qualitative study, it must be adequate and appropriate, meaning the sample size must be large enough for duplication of responses between study participants, and the participants interviewed must be knowledgeable in the phenomenon of interest, respectively (Morse, 2015). A research study has reached saturation when the information obtained from the study participants become redundant and when the additional data collected will

contribute to little or no new information to the study (Gentles et al., 2015). Conducting interviews is an approach in which the results of the study can reach data saturation (Fusch & Ness, 2015). While I proposed a provisional sample size of eight, I concluded the data collection process once data saturation was reached.

Instrumentation

For this research study, the main data collection instrument was in-depth, semistructured interviews. Interviews are the most predominant data collection method for a qualitative phenomenological study (Bevan, 2014; Jamshed, 2014). Interviews are conducted to uncover individual's thoughts and to collect their stories (Patton, 2015). Attaining rich and in-depth data from the study participants play an essential role in understanding the phenomenon of interest as well as explaining and resolving the research questions (Khan, 2014).

Face-to-face or Skype interviews with each participant, and open-ended interview questions allow the study participants to respond in their own words (Doody & Noonan, 2013). When time and geographical limitations inhibited face-to-face interviews, Skype facilitated participation in the study (Janghorban, Roudsari, & Taghipour, 2014). To collect the data effectively, I recorded the interviews which allowed me to focus on the content of the interview and the verbal cues. The interview protocol included recording study participants' responses using a digitally-recorded device.

The interview protocol contained a total of 11 main questions and six probing questions. The semistructured interview instrument was primarily designed after Davis (2012) and Fuller (2016). Specifically, I used four questions from the Davis (2012)

study, which explored the intersectionality of race and gender of eight African American women executives in academia and business. I used five questions from Fuller’s study (2016), which explored the lived experiences of 20 African American leaders to gain a deeper understanding of factors related to their career advancement in the Department of Army. The interview protocol guide (Appendix A) was modeled to answer the three research questions and specifically to collect data focusing on the study participants’ perceptions and lived experiences as they ascended to senior leadership positions and how the intersectionality of race and gender influenced or affected their career advancement. Table 1 displays a matrix of how the 11 interview questions align with the research questions.

Table 1

Research Matrix

Research Question	Interview Question
RQ 1	1, 2, 3, 5, 7
RQ 2	4, 7, 8, 9, 10
RQ 3	6, 8, 9, 10, 11

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

The recruitment of study participants (see Appendix B for Participant Recruitment Invitation) occurred over a three-week period, and interviews were planned within two weeks following participants willingness to volunteer for the study. I sought consent from the study participants before data collection explaining participation in the study is voluntary, and confidentiality and anonymity would be maintained. Once I received the signed consent form, I arranged the interviews that are convenient for the study

participants and ask them to allow one hour for the interviews. The interviews took place either by Skype video call or in a private and quiet venue where the study participants can feel relaxed and comfortable responding candidly and freely to the interview questions. Establishing trust and rapport with the study participants was essential step in the process as it can foster a willingness of the study participants to share perceptions and sensitive experiences about their career advancement to senior leadership. Holding similar identities with the study participants should aid in establishing a comfortable environment. As noted in the previous section, I used the snowball strategy to recruit study participants until data saturation was met.

The data collection process included me, LaTonya Mitchell, as the sole researcher conducting face-to-face semistructured interviews with each participant. If face-to-face were not convenient, I arranged interviews via Skype video call with the study participants. I sought permission to audio record the interviews. Many recording devices exist, and I used a digital voice recorder due to its capability of providing optimal sound quality and recording precision (Johnson, Dunlap, & Benoit, 2010). I also took field notes as a form of data collection.

At the conclusion of the interview, I debriefed the study participants and discussed the member checking process. The debriefing process included thanking the study participants and reminding them why the study was conducted. I also explained the purpose of member checking that will allow study participants the opportunity to verify the accuracy of their transcribed interviews and findings.

Data Analysis Plan

Once data collection was complete, the first step was the transcription of the participant interviews into verbatim transcripts. Transcription of interviews was completed by a third-party company in which I attained a Confidentiality Agreement. Files were securely stored and transmitted using the highest level of security. Transcribed interviews were labeled with an appropriate pseudonym to preserve confidentiality and anonymity. Once transcription was complete, I began the data analysis process. The process began with reading the interview transcripts thoroughly multiple times in order to gain familiarity with the data and to gain a deeper understanding of the interview (Stuckey, 2015). Data analysis is an interactive process which includes methodically searching and analyzing data to reveal a description of the phenomenon (Noble & Smith, 2014). Creswell (2014) reported that data analysis in qualitative research occurs concurrently with data collection and the written account of findings.

Finlay (2014) indicated that the quest of phenomenological analysis “is for rigorous, rich descriptions, backed by illustrative quotations, which evokes the phenomenon in immediate and potent ways” (p. 135). Earlier researchers have developed methods that follow a systematic approach for phenomenological analysis (Priest, 2002). For this qualitative phenomenological study, I used Moustakas’ (1994) modification of the van Kaam method of analysis of phenomenological data as the data analysis approach. The seven steps involved in the modified van Kaam method includes (a) horizontalization, (b) reduction and elimination, (c) clustering and thematizing, (d)

validation, (e) textural description, (f) structural description, and (g) composite structural-textural description (Moustakas, 1994).

Step one: horizontalization. The first step in the data analysis process was horizontalization. This step required listing and grouping all statements relevant to the experience and to treat all elements of the text with equal value (Moustakas, 1994; Davidsen, 2013; Priest, 2002). This process was facilitated by highlighting statements from the participant interview and then comparing every statement with the initial textural description of the phenomenon (Priest, 2002). Next, the researcher integrates carefully chosen statements into relevant sections of the initial textual description (Priest, 2002). For those statements that cannot be integrated into the initial description, I provided a separate consideration and expands the description to accommodate additional statements, as necessary (Priest, 2002).

I used the open coding technique. Open coding involved identifying concepts and categories by dividing the interview transcripts into smaller constituents and labeling their conceptual properties (Katsirkou & Lin, 2017). With open coding, the assignment of codes that emerged from the statements takes place (Blair, 2015). The assigned codes identified during open coding are not a priori code, meaning the codes emerged from the text and not predetermined (Blair, 2015; Stuckey, 2015).

Horizontalization is a continuous process and repeated for all study participants (Leech & Onwuebuozie, 2008; Priest, 2002). By using horizontalization, every “horizon” in the data that may enable the researcher to gain a deeper understanding of the lived experience is taken into consideration (Leech & Onwuebuozie, 2008).

Step two: reduction and elimination. This step involved reducing and eliminating unnecessary, repetitive, and ambiguous statements that are not relevant to the experience. Moustakas (1994) emphasized that to determine invariant constituents, significant statements relevant to the experience, the researcher should use two requirements to test each statement. The first requirement was to determine if the statement “contains a moment of the experience that is necessary and sufficient constituent for understanding the experience” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 121). The second requirement was to determine if the statement could be abstracted and labeled (Moustakas, 1994). If both requirements are met, I identified the statement as a theme in the study.

Step three: clustering and thematizing. In this step, clustering and thematizing invariant constituents, I grouped similar experiences into common themes (Moustakas, 1994). The labels given to the invariant constituents created the core themes of the experiences (Moustakas, 1994). In addition, each theme represented just one meaning (Yüksel & Yildirim, 2015).

Step four: validation. The fourth step, validation, required testing each of the invariant constituents and core themes of the study against complete records of the study participants obtained during data collection (Moustakas, 1994). For this study, validation entailed checking the invariant constituents and themes against the interview transcripts and field notes taken during the interview. Moustakas (1994) outlined the validation process by first determining if invariant constituents are “expressed explicitly” in the interview transcripts (p. 121). If the invariant constituents were not “expressed

explicitly,” they are “compatible” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 121). If the invariant constitutions were neither expressed explicitly nor compatible, they were irrelevant and omitted from the participant’s experience (Moustakas, 1994).

Step five: textural description. Following the verification of the invariant constituents and themes against interview transcripts, step five required constructing an individual textural description of the phenomena for each participant (Moustakas, 1994). The individual textural description included imaginative variation (e.g., vivid accounts) and verbatim statements taken directly from the interview transcripts (Moustakas, 1994). In this step, I created a table outlining the themes from each participant.

Step six: structural descriptions. In step six, construction of individual structural description of the essence of the experience for each participant based on the individual textural description and the vivid accounts occur (Moustakas, 1994). The structural description helped to understand the “how” of the phenomenon based on the participant’s lived experience (Moustakas, 1994). Hays and Singh (2012) emphasized that structural descriptions are like axial coding. In axial coding, the researcher identifies the core concept and goes back to the data to understand how the data integrated the concept (Gerber, Abrams, Curwood, & Magnifico, 2017).

Step seven: composite structural-textural description. Once the individual textural and structural descriptions for each participant are constructed, the final step in the data analysis process entailed developing the composite textural-structural description of the meaning and essence of the experience by incorporating the invariant constituents to the specific themes (Moustakas, 1994). The invariant meanings and themes from all

the study participants were analyzed to describe the experiences of the entire participant pool as a whole (Moustakas, 1994). At this stage, I employed selective coding. Selective coding entailed creating a core category from the interpretation of all categories and classification schemes (Gerber et al., 2017; Suter, 2012). Lastly, my approach to the treatment of discrepant cases was to look for areas of agreement and differences in perspectives and report findings in the results section.

To assist with data analysis, I used NVivo 12 software to code and classify the themes. NVivo works optimally with qualitative research designs and can enhance the accuracy and speed of the data analysis process (Zawame, 2015). NVivo enables the organization of data obtained from the interview transcripts as well as arrange and categorize data (Ishak & Bakar, 2012). By incorporating folders, I was able to integrate the data more effectively. I had a rudimentary understanding of the program and did not have any issues with the performing application essential when coding the interviews.

Issues of Trustworthiness

Qualitative researchers are mindful of striving for the high-quality when conducting research. As a novice researcher, I needed to consider my limitations in the research process. Thus, the practice of checking the data for accuracy was imperative throughout the research process. An important element in the research process is trustworthiness (Amankwaa, 2016). In qualitative research, trustworthiness is equivalent to rigor in quantitative research (Cope, 2014; Patton, 2015). The study must be reliable and valid in order to be viewed as trustworthy. To increase the trustworthiness of a qualitative study, Lincoln and Guba (1985) recommended four elements to enhance its

reliability and validity. These elements include credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Credibility

Credibility, the most important element to establish trustworthiness, refers to ensuring confidence that the findings are true and authentic (Amankwaa, 2016). Credibility in qualitative research is comparable to internal validity (Connelly, 2016). Member checking is viewed as a technique for establishing the validity of an account (Amankwaa, 2016). With member checking, the researcher returns data to the study participants to check for accuracy and resonance of the lived experience (Birt et al., 2016). Member checking took place to allow the study participants to review the interview transcripts for accuracy and that my data analysis conveys the study participants' perspectives. I also shared the findings with the study participants and allowed them an opportunity to ask questions about study findings.

Transferability

Transferability refers to the degree to which findings from one study can be applied to another study (Amankwaa, 2016). Transferability in qualitative research is comparable to generalization in quantitative research (Connelly, 2016). This element has been met in a qualitative study if non-participants in the study have connections to the findings, and the readers can connect the findings with their lived experience (Cope, 2014). To address transferability, I used rich, thick descriptions to communicate the findings. The researcher shares stories with adequate detail that the reader can obtain a vivid depiction of the research study (Amankwaa, 2016). By providing descriptive

details about the phenomenon, one can begin to evaluate the degree to which the conclusions reached can be transferred to other contexts, locations, and individuals (Amankwaa, 2016; Connolly, 2016). I included detailed contextual information on these essential elements.

Transferability also entails providing thick descriptions of the research process to enable the reader to make a judgment if the findings are transferable to their setting (Kortsjens & Moser, 2018). Specifically, transferability of the chosen theoretical frameworks and interview questions could be considered by other cultural groups to guide their research approach. Detailed description of both data collection and analysis process can be replicated in other studies. This illustrative study of eight potential study participants from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds can be leveraged to inform other cultural groups.

Dependability

Dependability is a way of showing the findings are stable and can be replicated (Amankwaa, 2016). Dependability in qualitative research is comparable to reliability in quantitative research (Amankwaa, 2016). This element has been met when another researcher endorses the decision trails at each phase of the research process (Cope, 2014). Dependability was established through the audit trail procedure (Cope, 2014). With an audit trail, I kept accurate records to document the necessary steps taken to complete the study. Dependability addresses the nature in which the researcher maintained all data collected to facilitate an audit trail (Anney, 2014). I maintained all data collected in a secured file cabinet for validating the inquiry process.

Confirmability

Confirmability refers to the degree in which findings are determined by the perspectives of the participant and not the researcher's bias or perspective (Amankwaa, 2014; Cope, 2014). Confirmability can be addressed using several approaches, such as audit trail process, verification of transcribed interviews against audio recorded data, and bracketing. In addition, confirmability can also be addressed by the researcher's description of how conclusions and interpretations were derived and providing evidence that the findings came directly from the participant's input (Cope, 2014). When reporting findings using qualitative methodology, confirmability was demonstrated using direct quotes from participant interviews that represent each emerging theme (Cope, 2014).

I used bracketing as a preventative approach to remain objective and neutral. Using a journal to annotate any thoughts and perceptions as an African American woman in a senior leadership position was essential in reducing researcher bias.

Ethical Procedures

In order to interview African American women in senior leadership positions in a health service agency in HHS, I sought guidance from the organization's ethics office on the appropriate process to recruit and seek permission for the study. Since the study included senior leaders who work for the federal government, recruitment and interviews did not take place during official work hours, and I did not use official office email accounts as a mechanism for communication regarding any aspects of this study. I submitted the Walden Institutional Review Board (IRB) application outlining the process by which I followed throughout the study. Once IRB approval was obtained (Approval

Number 10-22-18-0455291), I requested written consent from African American women in senior leadership to participate in the study. The written consent provided information that their participation is voluntary and that they can withdraw from the study at any time. I prescribed fictitious names to each participant to maintain confidentiality and anonymity. To protect the identity of the study participants and health service agency, I did not disclose the place of employment where study participants work in the study. Walden University discourages naming the organization in dissertation (Walden University, 2018).

Throughout the data collection process, I was the only individual who had access to the data. I safeguarded data, such as audio recorded interviews, interview transcripts, journal entries, and other data in a locked file cabinet and computer. I password protected electronic data. Per Walden University guidelines, I will destroy data five years after the completion of the study.

Summary

Chapter 3 included the research methodology and rationale for this qualitative transcendental phenomenological study. The research questions and provided detailed information on my role as researcher were discussed. The methodology section included a detailed approach for participant selection, instrumentation, data collection, as well as the data analysis plan, which will follow Moustakas' (1994) modification of the van Kaam method of analysis of phenomenological data. The chapter concluded with a discussion covering the issues of trustworthiness and ethical procedures for this study.

In Chapter 4, I reintroduce of the purpose of the study and the research questions. The research setting and participant demographics will be described. I provide an in-depth account of how the data was collected and analyzed, evidence of trustworthiness, results that include emergent themes, and the summary.

Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences and perceptions of African American women in their career advancement to senior leadership positions in a health service agency of the HHS in the United States. The study design centered on the intersectionality of race and gender that contributed to the career advancement of African American women leaders into a GS-15 and SES leadership position in HHS. The three research questions I used to guide this study are as follows:

RQ1: What are the lived experiences of African American women who have attained a senior leadership position in a federal health service agency within HHS?

RQ2: What are the perceptions of African American women who have attained a senior leadership position in a federal health service agency with HHS?

RQ3: In what ways did the intersection of race and gender contribute to the leadership experiences of African American women in senior leadership roles?

In this chapter, I describe information regarding the research setting, participant demographics, data collection, and data analysis. I discuss the evidence of trustworthiness including credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of the study, and a presentation of the results of this research. The chapter concludes with a summary.

Research Setting

At the time of this study, no personal or organizational conditions influenced participants or their experience that may have influenced the interpretation of the study results. There were no changes in personnel because I was the sole interviewer for the study. No budget cuts were necessary because I did not spend any money on study participants. There were no trauma or other negative experiences because the study participants volunteered to participate in the study, and the interviews were conducted in a private and secure environment.

Eight African American women at the senior leadership level agreed to participate in this study. I conducted five face-to-face interviews at a location convenient and comfortable for the participant and whereby I could maintain control of confidentiality. The interviews took place in a private and quiet meeting room at either a hotel, public library, or the participant's home. I conducted three interviews via Skype. Before the interviews began, the participants confirmed that they were in a private location that posed little to no interruptions.

Demographics

The criteria to participate in this transcendental phenomenological study were described in the participant recruitment invitation email. The criteria required that participants were an African American woman, currently employed in a senior leadership position at the GS-15 or SES level in the targeted health service agency. Participants must have worked in either headquarters or a field office, located in the continental United States. Of the nine individuals who showed interest in the study, eight met

criteria and agreed to participate. The demographic characteristics of the study participants encompassed GS-15 ($n = 7$) and SES ($n = 1$) senior leaders. The participants held current positions of senior advisor, deputy director, division director, district director, and senior executive director providing leadership and guidance in their respective workforce. The participants worked in the United States at either the headquarters office in the Maryland area ($n = 5$) or the field ($n = 3$). All participants self-identified as African American women, and seven were born in the United States, and one was born in a Caribbean country. All participants were college-educated, holding either a bachelor's, master's, or doctoral degree. Additional demographic information is included in Table 2. Fictitious names were given to each participant to protect their confidentiality.

Table 2

Study Participant Demographics

Fictitious name	Age of participant	Highest level of education	Years worked in federal government
Beulah	51-60	Bachelors	28 years
Carrie	51-60	Bachelors	28 years
Ethel	51-60	Bachelors	30 years
Harriet	51-60	Masters	28 years
Julia	41-50	Masters	14 years
Lucy	51-60	Bachelors	32 years
Marie	Over 60	Doctorate	31 years
Minnie	51-60	Bachelors	41 years

Data Collection

After receiving the Institutional Review Board approval (Approval Number 10-22-18-0455291) from Walden University, I emailed participant recruitment invitation (see Appendix B) to potential participants using purposive sampling in conjunction with snowball sampling. Once participants indicated their willingness to participate, I followed up with each participant via telephone and arranged face-to-face or Skype interviews (away from the participant's place of employment). Data collection spanned from November 5, 2018 through November 19, 2018, and participants were interviewed on separate days. The interview sessions ranged from 22 to 42 minutes with the average time of 36 minutes. There was no variation in data collection, and there were no unusual circumstances encountered in data collection.

Before the interview, I sent a reminder email to the participant confirming the date, time, and location of their interview, and I explained that the consent form, which was provided as an email attachment, would be discussed the day of the interview. Data were collected for the study through in-depth semistructured interviews with eight study participants. I conducted five interviews in a private and quiet meeting room at either a hotel, public library, or the participant's home. I conducted three interviews via Skype. Just before the commencement of the interview, I thanked the participants for their willingness to participate in the study. I reiterated the purpose of the study, the time commitment, the rationale for audio recording the interview, the voluntary nature of the study and their participation, measures to ensure the protection of their privacy and confidentiality, and how data would be kept secured. I also explained compensation

would not be offered for their participation. I allowed each participant time to read the consent form and ask questions, and I attained signed consents from those participants who were interviewed face-to-face. I obtained email consents from the participants interviewed via Skype. Participants provided permission for recording interviews before they commenced. Each participant selected a fictitious name written on an index card. I began the interview by collecting participant demographics, which included their age group, the highest level of education, how they cultural identify, and the number of years they worked as a federal employee. I audio recorded the interviews using a Sony PX Digital Voice Recorder, which was supported with field notes in my journal.

At the conclusion of the interview, I debriefed the participants by explaining the purpose of the study and the member checking process and determining if they would like to obtain the results of the study. I placed the consent form, index card with fictitious name, and interview protocol guide in a legal envelope and labeled with participant's fictitious name, which I kept secured.

Throughout the data collection process, I kept a journal to record notes from the interview and nonverbal communication displayed by the participants, as well as my thoughts on how the interview proceeded. The recorded notes were written at the end of the interview while the information was still fresh in my mind.

Data Analysis

The data from the digital recording were downloaded electronically onto the computer and submitted to Rev.com, a professional transcription company, who converted the audio files into Microsoft Word documents. After this process, I

downloaded and saved documents to password protected computer. During the state, the researcher listens to the recorded interviews while reviewing the verbatim transcripts looking for errors, correcting spellings, inserting punctuations, and ensuring the participant cannot be identified (Sutton & Austin, 2015). I requested the study participants to verify the accuracy of the transcription as part of member checking.

I re-read the eight interview transcripts thoroughly multiple times to familiarize myself with the data. The interview files were imported to NVivo 12 Plus for Windows software as Microsoft Word documents. In conjunction of NVivo, I created a consolidated word document that captured the participant's responses to each interview question, which allowed me to realize that most participants provided similar responses to the eleven interview questions and six probing questions. Saturation was met as no new data pertinent to the study was added.

To analyze the data, I used Moustakas' (1994) modified van Kaam method of phenomenological analysis in conjunction with NVivo software. By using NVivo software, the researcher can manage and analyze the data as well as identify themes (Dollah & Abduh, 2017) while maintaining the essence of the data that was essential for this phenomenological study. The utilization of NVivo 12 to categorize and process the transcribed interviews facilitates in reducing researcher bias.

Using the transcriptions of each participant, I repeated Moustakas' modified van Kaam method multiple times to develop themes. This method, as described in the data analysis section of Chapter 3, entails seven steps:

1. Horizontalization. Analysis of each interview transcript included horizontalization, which required the researcher to list and group all statements and to treat all elements of the text with equal value (Moustakas, 1994; Davidson, 2013; Priest, 2002). Every expression and statement relevant to the participant's experiences were listed and preliminarily grouped. In this step, the researcher uses open coding to identify concepts and categories by dividing the interview transcripts into smaller invariant constituents (relevant statements) and labeling their conceptual properties (Katsirkou & Lin, 2017). These concepts and categories were added to NVivo as nodes. Specifically, I read the transcripts, created notes to segregate pertinent texts from the interview transcripts. During this initial step, 22 nodes (codes) emerged from the analysis and not developed a priori.
2. Reduction and elimination. The researcher tests each statement to ascertain if it met the following two requirements: a) Does it contain a moment of experience relevant to understand the lived experience? b) Can the statement be abstracted and labeled? (Moustakas, 1994). If the statement met both requirements, it was integral to the experience. I removed statements and expressions not relevant, repetitive, and ambiguous to the study. As such, in this step, I re-assessed each coded invariant constituent in terms of its relevance to the phenomenon under study as well as the specific research questions.

3. Clustering and thematizing. Similar expressions were placed into groups for the development of common themes (Moustakas, 1994). Each theme represented one meaning (Yüksel & Yildirim, 2015). In this step, I identified key patterns and similarities, and I aligned emergent themes to the two theoretical frameworks - intersectionality and SCCT. The identified themes contributed to the development of a rich, thick understanding of the African American women in senior leadership lived experiences and perceptions of their career advancement. For this step, I used NVivo 12 software as an organizational tool to aid in the categorization of data and grouping of invariant constituents into appropriate categories.
4. Validation. The researcher checks the invariant constituents and themes for consistency against the participants completed transcribed records (Moustakas, 1994). During the validation process, a review of the transcripts to the invariant constituents in Step 3 as well as to their cluster meanings occurred. The invariant constituents that were not relevant to the participant's experiences were eliminated.
5. Textural description. The validated invariant constituents and themes were constructed into textural descriptions of the experiences for each participant. The individual textural descriptions included imaginative variation and verbatim statements (Moustakas, 1994) from the interview transcripts.
6. Structural description. Applying axial coding, the researcher constructs structural descriptions based on the individual textural descriptions of the

experiences and the imaginative variations (Moustakas, 1994). During this step, I used NVivo software to aid me in finding the textural descriptions for common invariant constituents among the eight participants. Along with NVivo, I used a Microsoft Word document to organize the data and to help me review the responses for similarities and commonalities.

7. Composite structural-textural description. Applying selective coding, the researcher constructs textural descriptions of the meanings and essences of the experience including invariant constituents and themes for the participants of the study (Moustakas, 1994). I used selective coding in this last step to examine the relationship between the two theories and the participants' lived experiences and perceptions of their career advancement to senior leadership roles.

Several overarching themes emerged for each research question of the study. In addition, there were several emergent subthemes from research questions one and two. The themes and subthemes will be discussed in the results section of this chapter.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

Credibility

Member checking is viewed as a technique for establishing the validity of an account (Amankwaa, 2016). Member checking took place to allow the study participants to review the interview transcripts for accuracy and that my data analysis conveys the study participants' perspectives. With member checking, the researcher returns the verbatim transcripts to the study participants to check for accuracy and resonance of the

lived experience (Birt et al., 2016). I asked the study participants to make necessary changes or include additional information. I gave participants one week to complete their review and return the transcript. Three study participants made revisions, which included grammatical and syntax changes. One study participant revised her initial statement to one interview question after having time additional time to consider the question.

The study findings also underwent examination. I shared the findings with the study participants and allowed them an opportunity to ask questions on findings. Along with the study participants review of the findings, the dissertation committee, such as dissertation chairperson and committee member, examined the study findings. These processes ensured the credibility of the study.

Transferability

To address transferability, I used rich, thick descriptions to communicate the findings. I shared stories with adequate detail that the reader can obtain a vivid depiction of the research study. By providing descriptive details about the phenomenon, one can begin to evaluate the degree to which the conclusions reached can be transferred to other contexts, locations, and individuals (Amankwaa, 2016; Connolly, 2016). I included detailed contextual information on these essential elements. Transferability also entails providing thick descriptions of the research process to enable the reader to make a judgment if the findings are transferable to their setting (Kortsjens & Moser, 2018). By providing a detailed description of the study methodology, instrumentation, data collection and analysis process, this study can be replicated by other researchers conducting a similar study.

Dependability

Dependability was established through the audit trail procedure (Cope, 2014). As a result, I developed an audit trail (see Appendix C) and documented events that occurred during the data collection and analysis. With an audit trail, I kept accurate records to document the necessary steps taken to complete the study. Dependability addresses the nature in which the researcher will maintain all data collected to facilitate an audit trail (Anney, 2014). During the data analysis process, NVivo enhanced the rigor of this study by providing a comprehensive trial of analysis. I maintained all data collected in a secured file cabinet or password-protected computer for validating the inquiry process.

Confirmability

Confirmability refers to the degree in which findings are determined by the perspectives of the participant and not the researcher's bias or perspective (Amankwaa, 2014; Cope, 2014). Confirmability was addressed using several approaches, such as audit trail process, verification of transcribed interviews against audio recorded data, and bracketing. I audio-recorded the interviews. In addition, confirmability was addressed by the description of how conclusions and interpretations were derived and providing evidence that the findings came directly from the participant's input (Cope, 2014). When reporting findings using a qualitative methodology, confirmability was demonstrated using direct quotes from participant interviews that represent each emerging theme (Cope, 2014).

I used bracketing as a preventative approach to remain objective and neutral. Using a journal to annotate any thoughts and perceptions as an African American woman in a senior leadership position was essential in reducing researcher bias.

Results

The themes derived using Moustakas (1994) modification of the van Kaam method in conjunction with NVivo 12 were based on the participants' responses and relevance to the research questions. In responding to the interview questions, the participants revealed their experiences and perceptions of their career advancement to senior leadership. The study results are organized by the research questions as follows:

RQ1: What are the lived experiences of African American women who have attained a senior leadership position in a federal health service agency within HHS?

RQ2: What are the perceptions of African American women who have attained a senior leadership position in a federal health service agency with HHS?

RQ3: In what ways did the intersection of race and gender contribute to the leadership experiences of African American women in senior leadership roles?

Research Question 1: Lived Experiences of African American Women

Research question 1 (RQ1) focused on eliciting participants to share their lived experiences in their ascension to a senior leadership position. To answer RQ1, five interview questions (1, 2, 3,5,7) were asked of each participant. Table 3 summarizes the seven emergent themes and two subthemes from participant responses for RQ1.

Table 3

Emergent Themes and Subthemes for Research Question 1

Research Question	Theme	Subtheme
RQ 1: What are the lived experiences of African American women who have attained a senior leadership position in a federal health service agency within HHS?	1. No easy attainment	
	2. Lateral moves	
	3. Denied promotions	
	4. Challenges	a. Management influences b. Individual hindrance
	5. Importance of mentorship and networks	
	6. Supportive leaders	
	7. Perseverance/self-determination	

Theme 1: No easy attainment. The first emergent theme was related to the participants' description of their advancement into a senior leadership position. This theme was supported by 88% of the participants. Except for one participant, all participants ($n = 7$) described difficulties and challenges endured in their advancement. Julia responded, "I almost feel like I am cheating because I feel like I had a pretty positive experience." In contrast, the other participants expressed different responses. Responses from Beulah and Carrie were very similar. Beulah commented, "I think the most challenging time was attending to break into full-time supervision...It hasn't been easy. But it has been worth it." Likewise, Carrie noted, "It has been challenging and

hard, but it is a career that I like.” Four participants spoke about the length of time to attain a senior leadership position. Specifically, Ethel stated, “In my mind, I think it was long...I thought I was prepared for leadership earlier, but I wasn’t granted the opportunity.” Minnie described, “I’ve been around 41 years. That just kind of tells you that it is not an easy attainment. It is not an easy undertaking. It’s not an easy path because there are obstacles in your way.” Harriet offered, “It took approximately seven years after the program to work my way up to a leadership position.” Marie attributed her length of time to attain senior leadership due to her race:

Now to get to the GS-15 level, it took quite a bit longer...I didn’t get a GS-15 level until [year] and it took 13 years to get to be a senior leader...I don’t think I would have had to fight as hard to get to where I am if I had been Caucasian. And not nearly as hard. And it wouldn’t have taken me as long.

Lucy shared the process she used to attain a senior leadership position:

That’s kind of how I advanced in many positions in my career...through just watching these unspoken practices and applying them until I encountered the next set of unspoken practices. I then put that information in my toolbox and learned how to apply it to continue to move forward.

Theme 2: Lateral moves. The second emergent theme was related to the participants’ description of how they transferred into positions at the same grade before attaining a higher-level leadership position. This theme was supported by 88% of the participants ($n = 7$). Beulah replied, “I’ve progressed fairly consistently. Usually somewhere between five to seven years. I would progress to a new position, even it

wasn't upward. My progression was lateral but in different skill sets." Carrie responded, "...from a [position] specialist, I lateraled over to as supervisory [position]...So those were the same grade." In describing her lateral moves, Ethel stated, "Lateraled from one GS-14 management position to another GS-14 management position. When I got into management, I came into management at a 14, and I lateraled as a 14 into different management positions." Julia shared, "I lateraled multiple times" at the GS-13 level. Lucy responded that "I've held various positions in my career. They are all stepping stones in my journey to leadership positions. Marie expressed her lateral moves in the following manner:

You have to realize that sometimes you're going to have to take a lateral in order to move up. Because it doesn't seem to make sense that you would have to go sideways in order to go forward, but sometimes you do...I was going sideways, from one 14 to another, until I could move forward.

Harriet expressed, "Never stop. Always have that goal in mind of what you want to do and where you want to be and just sometimes you may have to move left and right before you can start going forward again."

Theme 3: Denied promotions. The third emergent theme was related to participants' experiences in applying for leadership positions and denied promotion opportunities. This theme was supported by 50% of the participants ($n = 4$). The African American women leaders shared being passed over for a position where they met the qualifications. Beulah described her denial of promotion due to her gender:

I wanted to continue to advance; however, I was passed over several times. It was hard to understand why or understand what I was lacking. At times, I wondered if it was a gender or race issue, or simply my qualifications. I felt that I could see others getting positions that I thought I was competitive for. But the majority of them were male. That was the first time I would say I really had a full-on experience with difficulty in advancing because I was female.

Harriet and Marie shared similar experiences and quantified the number of times they applied for a leadership position in order to attain a promotion. Harriet stated, "I applied for over 20 positions and interviewed for less than half before I was able to procure a management position." Marie expressed, "I applied to hundreds of positions that I qualified for...Got interviews for quite a few of them but was never selected." Lucy voiced that while she had more qualification than other applicants, a Caucasian applicant would attain the position. Specifically, Carrie responded, "...qualified for a position but passed over for a Caucasian even when I was more qualified..."

Theme 4: Challenges. The fourth emergent theme was related to the challenges experienced by the participants. From this theme, two subthemes emerged. The first subtheme focuses on challenges attributed to management influences, and the second subtheme focuses on challenges attributed to the participant's individual hindrance.

Management influences. This subtheme was supported by 88% ($n = 7$) of the participants. Most of the participants shared stories of the challenges they faced by individuals in leadership positions. Several examples are provided to present the essence of this subtheme. Beulah had a supervisor who did not view her "...as an employee, but

more under a parent/child relationship where he felt he knew what was best..." for her.

Carrie described an interaction she encountered with her immediate supervisor when she first started at the agency:

The majority of the staff were Caucasian, more men than women. I think one of the challenges was within the first month or so of starting, my immediate supervisor, I think it was my immediate supervisor, explained to me that had very few dealings with African-American people and that as a boy growing up, they were called certain names, but he wouldn't repeat that. I think the challenge was that there were very few African-American, either women or men, in leadership positions at that time when I started.

Harriet cited, "I dealt with a White woman's accusation versus the truth. Even after it was discovered that she lied, the director still imposed a penalty on me and my staff."

Ethel responded that race and gender played a role in challenges faced by leadership. She stated:

I think that the challenges from leadership could definitely be based upon race and gender because of the lack of women of color in those roles. I think that folks are hesitant about giving us just the opportunity although we're more than capable.

Similarly, Marie described the time when she had to file an EEO complaint when not selected for a position. She felt like she was being discriminated based on sex and gender. Lucy reported challenges even after being qualified for a position. She reported:

Challenges being probably opportunities for myself when qualified for a position... I thought I had all the ducks in a row there was always this other “secret” door that I didn't know about. Then I would have to figure out the game of how to enter through that door.

Individual hindrance. Of the eight participants, half ($n = 4$) expressed self-imposed challenges. Carrie was apprehensive in applying for a position until she saw other African Americans attain higher-level positions. She responded:

I did not apply the first time around. I saw others get it, and then I applied. So, I was probably my own barrier...I think I was hindered. I didn't know if I could do it because I didn't see others of African-American descent in those positions. So, I think that was probably hindered me from applying.

Like Julia, Ethel stated that she was her own barrier due to age and intellect. She stated:

It was a big stepping stone for me because at that time, I guess young and dumb, and I guess I had tunnel vision and I wasn't looking towards the future and not realizing that this could be a career and a future.

Harriet attributed “her biggest challenge” to learning a new position while not having all the background knowledge and training required for the position. Lastly, Lucy suggested, “I think people get stuck...and they get stuck in their blind spots of the change in leadership or change in what leadership values.”

Theme 5: Importance of mentorship and networks. This theme was supported by 88% ($n = 7$) of the participants. The African American women leaders expressed that they had good mentors who were willing to help them and provide them advice. Carrie

responded, “there were a couple of women that took me under their wing, saw that I was working hard and that they spent time with me mentoring me and encouraging me.”

When discussing her mentors, Harriet stated, “They helped me to navigate through the waters and they put me in a place where I could have experiences and meet people, in order to guide me to where I wanted to go.” Maria entered a mentoring leadership program, which allowed her “...to see the bigger picture.” After completing the mentoring leadership program, she attained a senior leadership position. Along with having a mentor, Carrie, Julia, and Minnie described how they networked with colleagues to help them in their career journey.

Theme 6: Supportive leaders. The sixth emergent theme was related to supportive leaders who played critical roles in their career. This theme was supported by 63% ($n = 5$) of the participants. Beulah cited, “I was fortunate to be hired into a supervisory group that was very supportive of me as a woman and supportive of me even as African American.” Carrie expressed, “First woman district director was very supportive to me.” Like Carrie, Harriet described the support she received from leadership:

I was fortunate to have a director who was positive and willing to assist me. I also had a supervisor who was very positive, and he would talk to me, and I would sit and tell him what my likes, dislikes and what my interests were and so I had support early on, even if my peers were not very supportive.

When speaking out her leadership, Minnie smiled and shared:

I probably am fortunate that I had a very supportive management in all positions that I was in. I had managers who encouraged me and supported me...Again, I can say I had some very supportive managers of all ethnicities in my career who got behind me and encouraged me.

Lucy articulated that most of the leadership support came from male hiring officials.

Specifically, she cited:

Mostly male hiring officials hired me into positions during my career.

Unfortunately, most of the few females I worked for either did not show an interest in my career or did not support my advancement. I gained the most career knowledge and career advancement support from my male supervisors.

Theme 7: Perseverance/self-determination. All participants ($n = 8$, 100%) supported this emergent theme. Julia emphasized the importance of taking “charge of your career.” Ethel, Carrie, and Beulah described how “no” was a word they would not accept. Ethel stated her motto was, “to never tell myself, no. I will apply. I will ask. I will seek out opportunities. I don’t tell myself no.” Carrie shared that she wouldn’t tell herself no even though others would. “It made me more determined to do well in my job.” Carrie also reported that she was initially satisfied with serving as a first-line supervisor until she “saw African-American women, so seeing both the gender and the race together to say, ‘Yes, I can go higher’.” Moreover, Beulah commented, “The one thing I’ve never done is give up. I don’t take ‘no’ as a final answer unless I realize I didn’t want that anyway. I never give up. I just keep going.” She also commented that when she recognized race and gender challenges “it didn’t deter” her. She stated:

It actually would make me more determined to not only prove myself for myself but to prove myself on behalf of others in my race. Sometimes you're the only person that's representing your race or your gender to the people where you are. I always felt it was my responsibility not just to do well, not just for Beulah, but that, my whole race or my whole gender could potentially be judged based on either how I react or how I perform.

Like Beulah, the word, “never” was expressed by Harriet when describing lessons learned. She stated, “Never take anything for granted. Work hard. Keep an open mind. And never really stop working towards your goal.”

Lucy and Marie set goals to attain leadership positions. Once Lucy achieved the grade that her dad attained when he was a civil servant, she stated, “I first cried. I then realized that I had set my own ‘imaginary’ bar and then removed the bar to just keep moving forward.” Marie’s goal was to attain a GS-15 before retirement, and with a smile on her face, she expressed, “I got it...mission accomplished, so that’s why...I can work as long as I want to, and I can sit down when I’m ready.”

Similarly, Minnie reported that she did not image ascending to senior leadership because there were not many “that looked like me.” She stated, “I did see pockets of hope of others who were in the [leadership] rank.” Minnie’s determination to ascend to a high senior-level position took years. It was not until she “had an opportunity to go to headquarters or to see someone or someone come visiting our office.”

Research Question 2: Perceptions of African American Women

Research question 2 (RQ2) focused on eliciting participants to share their perceptions in their ascension to a senior leadership position. To answer RQ2, five interview questions (4, 7, 8, 9, 10) were asked of each participant. Table 4 summarizes the six emergent themes and 10 subthemes from participant responses for RQ2.

Table 4

Emergent Themes and Subthemes for Research Question 2

Research Question	Theme	Subtheme
RQ 2: What are the perceptions of African American women who have attained a senior leadership position in a federal health service agency within HHS?	1. Barriers to advancement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Denial of opportunities b. Geographic limitations c. Family obligations d. Lack of higher-grade leadership positions e. Lack of feedback
	2. Glass ceiling	
	3. Stereotypes	a. Angry Black woman
	4. Implicit bias	
	5. Strategies for advancement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Volunteer b. Perform details/acting roles c. Visibility/Be seen d. Take extra steps
	6. Invest in others	

Theme 1: Barriers to advancement. The first emergent theme was related to barriers to advancement which hinders career ascension to senior leadership. From this theme, five subthemes emerged, (a) denial of opportunities, (b) geographic limitations, (c) family obligations, (d) lack of higher-grad leadership positions, and (e) lack of feedback.

Denial of opportunities. Five of the eight participants (63%) expressed their inability to pursue a leadership opportunity. Harriet stated, “I thought that I was prepared for leadership earlier, but I wasn't granted the opportunity. Beulah perceived denial of opportunities potentially related because of her gender. She expressed, “I was passed over several times for, not necessarily just for promotions but for opportunities like details. I wanted to be able to try other things and really felt a little bit more pigeonholed.” Alternatively, Lucy and Harriet perceived lack of opportunities due to their race. Lucy commented, “Barriers are the opportunities for people of color to get into those higher ranking and higher-level positions. It seems like there's a lot of politics involved.”

Harriet described:

I know there are some opportunities that I have missed in my career because of the color of my skin, and I think they failed to realize just how many people you do know and just how many people respect you.

Minnie provided an example where she perceived a situation as disparate treatment. She stated:

Now that's not to say that I did not observe what I could perceive as disparate treatment. Maybe, I can think of an instance where I requested to do a detail and was told, "No." Then six months later a colleague of mine was asked to do a detail and was allowed. All things being equal, what could you deduce that to?

Geographic limitations. This subtheme was supported by 50% ($n = 4$) of the study participants. Three of the four African American women leaders (Carrie, Harriet, and Minnie) reported that greater opportunities are available for individuals who are in headquarters as opposed to individuals who work in field locations. Julie explained that a reorganization changed her duty station, which was significantly further from her home. As a result, she began exploring other career opportunities that could provide her greater flexibility.

Family obligations. Three of the eight participants (38%) explained how family obligations might impact one's ability to ascend the organizational ladder. Ethel stated, "Sometimes I think that although it's not supposed to happen, sometimes I think that your family obligations may become a factor." Beulah shared the challenges with balancing parental responsibilities with official travel obligations:

...just as women, if we are family inclined and really want that balance, sometimes I see that as a hurdle, especially in positions where travel may be required, long hours, long days, that there's a little bit of a struggle there. I want to be a good mother.

Responding similarly to Beulah, Minnie also discussed how family obligations might present obstacles in one's ability to advance. She cited:

Just the reality of having home obligations, having personal lives that include being wives and mothers, you're not going to be able to pick up readily. You have to, in many cases, make a choice as to whether or not you want to advance, and continue to be married, and have a committed marriage. I mean those are hard decisions. That's what I see oftentimes, having the decision that has to be made if you want to advance.

Lack of higher-grade leadership positions. This subtheme was supported by 25% ($n = 2$) of the participants. Ethel and Julia perceived that barriers to advancement were due to lack of higher-grade leadership positions. Whereas Ethel attributed this factor to individuals not leaving high-level positions, Julia reported that as individuals “...get to the fourteen and fifteen level, the opportunities are less.”

Lack of feedback. This subtheme was supported by 25% ($n = 2$) of the participants. Minnie explained, “Nobody would give me feedback” when she was not selected for a position. Julia described that the lack of honest feedback could hinder one’s ability in developing and becoming a “better asset.” Julia also suggested:

...the culture is very passive aggressive and so people don't say what they really mean so you create a space for people either think they are really awesome and they're not. Or yearning for feedback so that they can grow and develop, and nobody is giving to them.

Theme 2: Glass ceiling. The second emergent theme was related to the participants’ perception of the glass ceiling as well as both a European-American and male-dominated leadership workforce. This theme was supported by 63% ($n = 5$) of the

participants. Lucy and Minnie shared statements about their perception of the glass ceiling. Lucy indicated the glass ceiling is still prevalent. She stated:

Most of the senior leaders do not tend to be people of color. In watching this process happen, it seems to me the glass ceiling is still alive and well.

Alternatively, Minnie suggested that the glass ceiling is “being shaken” by women leaders:

I think that there was a shift in the, over time where what was routinely male dominant started to shift into more females being selected for SES. It wasn't always that way when I first entered. You could see it was very male dominant. You didn't have very many female bosses, branch directors, district directors. You just didn't see many. But then there was probably a shift where you started to see an opening, the glass ceiling somewhat being, I wouldn't call it shattered. I would just call it being shaken. You saw a few here, pockets where those positions were starting to be filled by females.

A similar sentiment was echoed by Harriet. She expressed that “there are a lot more women in upper-level management.” However, Harriet pointed out that “there are not a lot of women of African descent in upper-level positions.” Carrie’s perceptions were that “...there were very few African Americans, either women or men, in leadership positions at the time I started.” Ethel stated, “I think that as a woman, I think we’re still the minority. I think that...men are still perceived the perceived leaders. I don’t know why.”

Theme 3: Stereotypes. The third emergent theme was related to stereotypes perceived by the African American women leaders. Five out of eight participants (63%) supported this theme.

Beulah explained stereotypes related to how African Americans communicate and carry themselves:

When people see African American women, they have a predefined stereotype as to, how we speak and how we act. I don't believe that for the most part, people truly feel or felt that a African American woman could walk into a place and be able to articulate an argument or a position, not be emotional, or that we could literally have a seat at the table and represent either our office or our position or whatever our responsibility is in a professional manner.

Lucy discussed stereotypes ascribed to women of African American descent. She said, "I think women of African American descent are, more times than not, labeled with a stigma that we have attitudes, poor grammar, and are academically inferior to our white counterparts." Ethel explained that a colleague, who was not of African American descent, was "comfortable enough to say" to her that a Jamaican-American manager's personality was "harsh" and that "she was rough around the edges." Carrie described how she had to overcome stereotypes because of colleague's actions. She stated, "And the ones [African Americans] that were there were characterized as employees that were not the best employees, productivity-wise and attitude-wise. So, the challenge was to overcome the perception of that." When asked the question about what advice would you give to aspiring women of African American descent, Minnie offered, "Being vocal but

not loud. Being confident but not aggressive. Being assertive and understanding where that fits into your interactions so that you're not perceived to be pushy.”

Angry Black woman. From the stereotype theme, one subtheme, angry Black woman emerged. This subtheme was supported by 38% ($n = 3$) of the participants. Ethel emphasized that she has to be cognizant of her facial expression, “I have just had to really teach myself to just have a poker face and then just wait until I can express without being perceived as an angry Black woman...sometimes they feel we may be too emotional.” Julia and Lucy shared similar responses about office culture playing a role in how African American women being labeled as “angry” or “hostile.” Julia stated:

...in meetings, or if I disagree with something or if I challenge a perspective, I have to be mindful of my tone, or my energy, or my body language because it be perceived as the angry Black woman...I think that delivery of negative news or a disagreement because of my race and cause culturally I think we have been put in a box to respond a specific way. And when you don't you are perceived as angry or hostile when you could just be passionate.

Lucy described the angry Black woman stereotype as a “double standard.” She said:

I don't know what we can do for others not to feel and I'll put it in quotes “threatened” by us. Women of African descent who have strong personalities are in many instances labeled as angry Black women. Yet, the office culture more than not commonly accepts as the norm for a Caucasian to be in a meeting bang on the table and using profanity. Clearly a double-standard.

Theme 4: Implicit bias. The fourth emergent theme, implicit bias, was supported by 63% ($n = 5$) of the participants. Both Carrie and Beulah voiced similar responses about how others perceived them when they performed inspections. Specifically, they suggested that some Caucasians were “surprised” that an African American was conducting an inspection at their facility. Carrie stated, “Sometimes the people were shocked by an African-American person coming to their facility... Most of [them] were Caucasian men...they were surprised to see an African-American woman.” Beulah cited:

I will tell you that there were some places in my job where I had to go on inspections, and I felt it there a lot, “Oh, what is this African American woman doing coming to my place to tell me how to run my company.”

Beulah also described how one’s biases can lead to “shock” and a “pleasant surprise” when others see the actions of African American women. Beulah articulated:

When they see people like us, it's actually more of a shock than anything else. For the most part, it's a pleasant surprise. Then you get the comments such as, “Oh, you don't act like other.” It makes me wonder, “Well, exactly what did you expect that I would be acting like? We're all the same.” ...It ends up being some sort of a surprise to people when they see women like us. They can speak and articulate, intelligent, educated...It ends up being a surprise.

Lucy ascribed “unspoken bias” to the era of slavery, and that inequality exists for women African American descent. She said:

I believe there is a long-standing, unspoken bias against women of African descent, which goes back as far as slavery. I don't believe we have come to a point yet where women of Africa descent are considered in the work world as equal to their counterparts, and in instances, just as, if not more than, qualified for more leadership positions than are being offered.

Harriet perceived bias exists for all women of African descent regardless of their cultural identify. She responded:

I know a lot of Nigerian-Americans that work for the agency and several of them have been treated just as bad as any other natural born US American who is black or African-American. So, I don't think there's a big difference.

Lastly, Minnie suggested that if someone wants “to discount you for your gender or your race,” expertise and knowledge should strengthen your position. She stated, “when you know what you know, that’s nothing that anybody can take away from you.”

Theme 5: Strategies for advancement. All eight participants (100%) offered strategies aspiring African American should consider for advancing into a senior leadership position. From this emergent theme, four subthemes emerged: (a) volunteer, (b) perform details/acting roles, (c) visibility/be seen, and (d) take extra steps.

Volunteer. The subtheme, volunteer, was supported by 63% of the African American women leaders ($n = 5$). The words, “volunteer,” “take on many opportunities,” and “take on projects” were common phrases used by the participants. Carrie suggested that aspiring African American women leaders should “volunteer” and not “sell [themselves] short” when the opportunities arise to volunteer. Ethel emphasized that

volunteering for “different assignment” lets “people know that you’re capable.” Harriet reported that volunteering could potentially give you an advantage over others. Specifically, she stated, “take as many opportunities as you’re allowed to be more marketable, something to put on your resume to make yourself stand out over the competition.” Lucy suggested that aspiring African American women leaders should “take on projects that no one asks you to do that will benefit the agency.” Lucy recommended that one should “always willing to volunteer for national work groups and projects.”

Perform details/acting roles. This second emergent subtheme was supported by three of the eight participants (38%). Carrie and Ethel described the importance of performing details and the positive outcomes related to them. Carrie shared how different details may provide exposure to “many different people” and “many different jobs.” By performing details, Ethel reported one has the “opportunity to do different positions, to try different roles” whereby a full commitment to the position is not required. Minnie said that during the period when she acted for her supervisor for “a series of days and weeks...someone was watching and saw that I had the capability that led to me ultimately getting that job.”

Visibility/be seen. The fourth emergent subtheme, visibility/be seen, was supported by five of the eight participants (63%). Beulah said, “Wherever you are, be amazing. Then you’re seen. Then you can shine. Now people get to know you. You’ll be noticed, and then the next step may not be as difficult.” Carrie recognized the importance of speaking up. As a woman, she learned “to not let my voice not be heard

when I'm in the presence of mostly males, that I do add value." Carrie and Ethel emphasized the need to be visible when working on assignments and projects. Minnie stressed that one should "be willing to get your face and place known throughout the organization" as well as "be recognized by name and your deeds, and by your work product."

Take extra steps. All eight participants (100%) supported this subtheme. Having an advanced degree and credentials, doing twice as much, and being mindful of personal traits were articulated by the African American women leaders. For example, statements shared by several participants include the following:

- I do think that just in order to be considered equal, that we have to have that bachelor's, that master's, that Ph.D., those certifications, behind our names to be seen. I don't think right now there's any substitute for that in this world or at least not where I see. If you don't have it there are some perceived differences (Beulah).
- I think that you have to make sure that you are doubling on top of your job than other folks... I found myself working all kinds of crazy hours, this and that, because I wanted to just make sure that nothing fell apart, nothing fell through, that it become as if I wasn't doing my part (Ethel).
- You know my mom used to tell me that going out of the door you have to be twice as smart or three times as smart...And so you might as well just figure that out now so that you always have that plan in your pocket (Marie).

- I also think people of color have to adapt to the office lingo and cultures and how we conduct ourselves. Someone once told me to dress where I think that I want to be. And so, from that day I started wearing suits and learning the various office nuances. I just feel like we should consider taking that extra step in what we do. And it's unfortunate, but it's reality. I feel as though we don't look the part and if we don't articulate the questions the way that those in higher positions feel as though we should answer them, that 'secret door' appears and blocks us from advancement (Lucy).
- Your looks, your dress, your speech, the way you carry yourself, the way you communicate...We will be kidding ourselves to think that that's not, those are not factors. They are factors (Minnie).

Along with Minnie, Carrie stressed the importance of public speaking and having the ability to write. In addition, Carrie, Harriet, and Lucy shared similar responses that African American women should understand their work including "guidance documents" and regulatory "rules."

Theme 6: Invest in others. The sixth emergent theme, invest in others, was supported by 75% ($n = 6$) of the participants. "Helping others," "giving people opportunities," and "pulling somebody along" were common statements voiced by the African American women. Many of them commented that they must help others ascend the organizational ladder since someone helped them attain their leadership position. For example, Beulah stated, "I feel that I'm here to also give back because there were a lot of people that helped me up the ladder. I want to be a part of helping other people up the

ladder too.” Carrie’s and Minnie’s responses were closely aligned to Beulah’s. Carrie said, “I have learned as others have helped and encouraged me to try to do the same thing.” Minnie expressed:

...recognizing that someone invested in you, and you should return that fortunate experience by investing in others. Seeing people beyond, see where you can help someone along the way to advance in their career because that's the benefit of what you've received.

Harriet and Lucy articulated that as African American women, they must be willing and unafraid of helping other female minority women ascend the organizational ladder. They believed that investing in others was their responsibility. Lucy stressed that she would “not allow the culture mentality to dictate who I am or what I do to help others.”

Research Question 3: Intersection of Race and Gender Contribute to Leadership Experiences

Research question 3 (RQ3) focused on eliciting participants to share in what ways did the intersection of race and gender contribute to their leadership experiences of African American women in senior leadership roles. To answer RQ3, five interview questions (6, 8, 9, 10, 11) were asked of each participant. Table 5 summarizes the four emergent themes from participant responses for RQ3.

Table 5
Emergent Themes for Research Question 3

Research Question	Theme	Subtheme
RQ 3: In what ways did the intersection of race and gender contribute to the leadership experiences of African American women in senior leadership?	1. Race challenges 2. Microaggression 3. Invisibility of African American women 4. Dealing with racism	

Theme 1: Race challenges. Except for one participant, the first emergent theme, race challenges, was supported by seven (88%) African American women leaders. Beulah stated that she experienced challenges due to her gender. She said, “I really felt the gender more than the race...When it comes to race. I’ve never truly felt singled out, just because of the demographics of the area.”

The other participants shared different responses. Of the seven African American women leaders, two participants, Ethel and Julia, viewed race and gender as mutually-exclusive and felt challenges were due to both race and gender. Ethel attributed these challenges to “the lack of women of color in those roles.” Julia stated, “When you see me, you don’t see a woman than a black woman. You see a black woman. I don’t treat my race and gender separate.”

Five participants (Carrie, Harriet, Lucy, Marie, and Minnie) felt they were most often faced with challenges due to their race. Lucy explained, “I feel I am most often faced with race challenges...I believe the appreciation for my knowledge and expertise would be better received if I was a Caucasian woman.” Carrie and Marie had similar

responses and based challenges due to race and not gender because of the number of women in senior leadership positions. Their sentiments are as follows:

- I would think it would be more race than gender just because there's so many females in higher positions in [agency] compared to when I first started [agency]. So, I think the race, because I still don't see as many African-Americans in the upper, higher position in the agency across the board (Carrie).
- Well for me I didn't think that my gender factored in as much as my race. Because a lot of Senior Leaders in our agency are female. So, I didn't see the gender as the barrier. The race for me was the barrier. And it almost always has been from day one since I've started with the agency (Marie).

Harriet described how her race played a significant role in the challenges she faced:

I truly believe that the color of our skin plays a bigger role than our sex. For me, my sex played a lesser role. I think once I proved myself that I wasn't a weepy woman who needs to be handheld, once I showed them that I had the ability, I was assertive enough, to find the truth, know the facts and act on them and I think once I proved myself in that way, I don't think they saw sex as much. I got more blow back on color.

Minnie expressed that individuals may have experiences interacting with women for various reasons; however, he or she may not have experiences interacting with an African American woman. Minnie stated:

I say, my race more than my gender. The reason for that is I believe as you encounter new people in an organization, they have my gender; they have mothers. They have sisters. But they may never have had an experience of working with an African American female. Because of that, some of those encounters are the first time that they are encountering that experience...Never truly felt gender was a hindrance to my advancement. I think that was because of how I came across as a person.

Theme 2: Microaggression. The second emergent theme, microaggression, was supported by 88% ($n = 7$) of the participants. The African American women shared experiences of being treated differently, having their work scrutinized, and enduring negative behaviors. Carrie revealed that individuals would question her “for being a woman or my race by their behaviors or words.” Julia commented on the treatment of African American women leaders. She explained:

I do think as a leader, staff employees treat you differently as a woman. And as a black woman, I think that certain things they challenged you on that they wouldn't challenge me on if I was a white woman or a white male, as a leader.

Marie stated that regardless of one's attributes, all African American women are treated the same. She said:

It's all African American women. You know, whether you're lighter toned, darker toned, it doesn't matter as far as I could see. As long as you claimed to be African American, then you fell into that category for the powers that be that were making selections.

Minnie explained that she did not see anything “overtly demonstrated,” however, she recognized that there were factors that may impact leadership advancement. She responded:

You sometimes are put in a situation where your manager, your leaders could be folks who are not familiar with or comfortable working with an African American female. We all are victims of that. I do believe that those are factors in terms of advancement. Can I say that I've seen it overtly demonstrated? No. But I do know that it is a factor.

Ethel and Harriet shared experiences how others would be not trust until their words and actions were verified. Ethel stated:

Sometimes they're going to still ask somebody else to confirm because they do that to us a lot. This is happening. They come to me and they ask me for information, for guidance, and then you turn around and then they ask somebody else exact same thing for confirmation.

Harriet described how her work was scrutinized and questioned even when following procedures. She commented:

But as for the color of our skin, it taught me that though I might be doing the exact same thing as a person of a different color, the scrutiny or the level of ire that it would raise in the person I was doing it to was almost tenfold. No matter if I'm following the book, following the rules, following the steps and doing the exact same thing another manager of a different color might be doing, it didn't matter.

Lucy explained that her knowledge was the basis of hostility in the workplace. She shared:

Unfortunately, instead of the knowledge being a “plus” in support my supervisor and the office’s mission, my supervisor displayed behavior and actions towards me that made me feel the supervisor harbored feelings of insecurities and was threatened by my knowledge, and especially as a person of color. So, perhaps some of the opportunities did not come as quick for me because of sometimes being subjected to the unspoken “stay in your place” games and misnomer that “white is always right.” The effects of this culture made it hard for me to climb the career ladder.

Theme 3: Invisibility of African American women. This emergent theme was supported by five of the eight participants (63%). Whereas one participant voiced a positive perspective on the visibility of African American women in leadership, four had a different perspective. Beulah suggested that women were “making progress” and that she was “proud of us because we’re making progress.” When a younger African American woman asked Beulah, “How many African American women do we have in leadership positions?” She stated, “I started rattling off names of directors...I was like, ‘Oh yea, we’re everywhere. We’re all over the place.’ That makes me proud.

Alternatively, four African American women leaders (Carrie, Ethel, Harriet, and Lucy) commented that African American women were limited in high-level positions. For example, Ethel stated:

I do observe when I'm in senior leadership meetings. This is just something that I personally do myself. I look around the room and I see how many people look like me in the meeting. There's not very many when you count the total room participants. I can see that the positions for us are limited, very limited.

Harriet and Carrie supported Ethel's observation. Specifically, Harriet explained, "At this time in the agency there are a lot more woman in upper-level management positions. However, there are not a lot of women of African descent in upper-level positions."

Lucy attested that women of African descent are not in senior leadership positions because, "some, I believe bring into the workforce a mentality that they feel we should work for them, rather than work with them."

Theme 4: Dealing with racism. The fifth emergent theme, dealing with racism, was shared by four of the eight participants (50%). Carrie stated she had a supervisor "that some would characterize as racist," while others would characterize him as "uninformed or ignorant." Carrie indicated that by working with this supervisor she "was able to kind of shape or change or expose him to another...confront his perceptions." Through this interaction, Carrie reported that she felt there were some changes in how he felt about African Americans. Harriet stated that she had not dealt with "any blatant racism, but there was a lot of covert." In contrast, Lucy said, "I've seen blatant racism." Instead of focusing time on racism, she would "take all those tools and put them in my toolbox to help the next generation of folks and to help others as well and to help myself." Minnie was hesitant on interpreting acts as racism. She said:

You do experience...I don't know if I can label it as racism because I don't think everything that happens to us is based on race. But it can easily be interpreted as race being the basis for something happening. I've made mistakes and still have been able to overcome those mistakes so that it didn't negatively impact my career.

Summary

The purpose of chapter 4 was to present the analysis of the lived experiences and perceptions of African American women leaders in their career advancement to a senior leadership position as well as in what ways did the intersectionality of race and gender contribute to their career advancement into a GS-15 and SES leadership position. The participants in this study were selected using a purposeful sampling approach in conjunction with snowball sampling. All participants in the study were African American women in senior leadership at the targeted agency within HHS. Audio-taped, face-to-face or Skype interviews were conducted.

To gain a deeper understanding of the study phenomenon, I designed three research questions to guide this study. After eight participants were interviewed, saturation was met as no new data pertinent to the study was added. The eight participants provided responses that formed all the data used in this study. Using the modified van Kaam method of phenomenological analysis in conjunction with NVivo software, I identified similar invariant constituents from the interview transcripts and grouped them into clusters. The clustered groupings from the lived experiences and perceptions of the eight participants developed the emergent themes surrounding the

phenomenon of the study. Tables 3, 4, 5, summarize the themes and subthemes for RQ1, RQ2, and RQ3, respectively, that emerged from the data analysis of the participant responses. Table 6, on pages 139, is an aggregate of the themes and subthemes for the three research questions.

RQ1 was designed to elicit detailed responses about their lived experiences of the African American women in their career advancement to a senior leadership position. The seven themes that emerged from this research question were as follows: (a) no easy attainment, (b) lateral moves, (c) denied promotions, (d) challenges, (e) importance of mentorship and networks, (f) supportive leaders, and (g) perseverance/self-determination. Except for one study participants, the African American leaders felt that attainment of a senior leadership position was not an easy journey. For many, it took years and a significant number of job applications to achieve a GS-15 or SES position. Most of the study participants responses reflected that they had to take lateral positions before attaining a senior leadership position and that they did not have a straight climb up the organizational ladder. The African American women leaders described being passed over for promotions for which they were qualified. All participants expressed challenges that they endured, either influenced by management or self-imposed, that they experienced during their career advancement. While they faced obstacles and challenges in their senior leadership pursuit, participants mentioned that having a good mentor and networking, as well as supportive leaders helped paved their way to obtain a leadership position. All participants felt that perseverance/self-determination was essential as they worked towards their leadership goals.

RQ2 was designed to elicit detailed responses about the perceptions of the African American women in their career advancement to a senior leadership position. From this research question, six themes emerged which are as follows: (a) barriers to advancement, (b) glass ceiling, (c) stereotypes, (d) implicit bias, (e) strategies to advancement, and (f) invest in others. All participants shared barriers that they felt could hinder advancement to senior leadership. Many shared that denial of opportunities, geographic limitations, family obligations, lack of higher-grade leadership positions, and lack of feedback could hamper growth. These barriers were identified as subthemes. Several participants expressed their perceptions about the glass ceiling being prevalent in the agency, which was contributed to why few African American women holding leadership positions.

Many participants thought that stereotypes and biases are prescribed to African American women, and several had to be mindful of being labeled as an angry Black woman. While they perceived career advancement barriers exist, all participants offered strategies for advancement, which I grouped as subthemes. They included (a) volunteer, (b) perform details/acting roles, (c) visibility/be seen, and (d) take extra steps. The majority of the participants felt investing in aspiring African American women who desired to climb the organizational ladder was important.

RQ3 was designed to focus on eliciting participants to share their perspective on in what ways did race and gender contribute to their advancement into a senior leadership position. The four themes that emerged from this research question were as follows: (a) race challenges, (b) microaggression, (c) invisibility of African American women, (d) and dealing with racism.

Except for one participant, analysis of the responses revealed that the African American women leaders felt they were most often faced challenges related to their race. Two participants felt that challenges were due to both race and gender. One participant expressed challenges due to her gender. The majority of the participants experienced aggressive acts and behaviors as an African American woman. In addition, several felt that although women were in senior leadership positions, they expressed that there is an absence of African American women in such roles. In contrast, one participant felt that African American women were in senior leadership positions. Few participants discussed racism, either covert or blatant, or experiencing situations based on race.

Table 6

Emergent Themes and Subthemes (Aggregate) for RQ1-RQ3

Research Question	Theme	Subtheme
RQ 1: What are the lived experiences of African American women who have attained a senior leadership position in a federal health service agency within HHS?	1. No easy attainment 2. Lateral moves 3. Denied promotions 4. Challenges 5. Importance of mentorship and networks 6. Supportive leaders 7. Perseverance/self-determination	a. Management influences b. Individual hindrance

(Continued)

Table 6 continued

Emergent Themes and Subthemes (Aggregate) for RQ1-RQ3

Research Question	Theme	Subtheme
RQ 2: What are the perceptions of African American women who have attained a senior leadership position in a federal health service agency within HHS?	1. Barriers to advancement	a. Denial of opportunities b. Geographic limitations c. Family obligations d. Lack of higher-grade leadership positions e. Lack of feedback
	2. Glass ceiling	
	3. Stereotypes	a. Angry Black woman
	4. Implicit bias	
	5. Strategies for advancement	a. Volunteer b. Perform details/acting roles c. Visibility/ Be seen d. Take extra steps
	6. Invest in others	
RQ3: In what ways did the intersection of race and gender contribute to the leadership experiences of African American women in senior leadership?	1. Race challenges	
	2. Microaggression	
	3. Invisibility of African American women	
	4. Dealing with racism	

The final chapter, Chapter 5, includes an introduction, interpretation of findings, limitations of the study, recommendations for this study, implications for creating positive social change, and conclusion that describes the essence of the study.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Introduction

Given that there is an underrepresentation of African American women in senior leadership (Beckwith et al., 2016), understanding how such women have broken the concrete ceiling and attained a senior leadership is essential in creating a diverse leadership workforce. Studies exploring the underrepresentation of African American women in leadership positions in a federal health service agency are lacking. The purpose of this transcendental, qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences and perceptions of African American women leaders in their career advancement to senior leadership in a health service agency within HHS. I conducted this study to address gaps in the research which included a scarcity of research on how African American women experience leadership and achieve leadership roles. There is also a paucity of research exploring the issue of intersectionality in the federal sector (Hamidullah & Riccucci, 2017). Thus, the information acquired in this study fills the gap in the literature on African American women in senior leadership positions in a federal health service agency.

I chose a qualitative phenomenological approach because it allowed me to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon under study by obtaining and conveying, in the participants' own words, their experiences and perceptions of career advancement. I conducted in-depth, semistructured interviews with eight African American women leaders at the GS-15 and SES levels. I compared the study results to findings identified in the literature review section in Chapter 2 to determine whether this study added new

knowledge and information or not about on the phenomenon on the underrepresentation of African American women leaders. The findings were supported by previous research. The findings also support the tenets of Lent et al.'s (2006) SCCT and Crenshaw's (1991) intersectionality, which served as the theoretical frameworks for this study.

Several key findings that emerged from analysis were that participants experienced barriers and challenges in their career advancement but were able to achieve their leadership goals with the support of others and through perseverance and self-determination. The participants perceived several barriers and stereotypes as roadblocks to career advancement but identified specific strategies which could be employed to advance within the agency. Another finding revealed that the participants felt an obligation and responsibility to help aspiring African American women achieve their career goals. The participants perceived that women are making progress in attaining senior leadership positions; however, they indicated a limited number of African American women exists at this level. The general perception was that the participants felt they were most often faced with challenges due to their race because of the lack of African American women in senior leadership roles.

Interpretation of the Findings

In accordance with the literature review, the findings of this study confirmed that African American women leaders endure impediments and challenges that make ascension to senior leadership a difficult endeavor (Beckwith et al., 2016). The findings also build on and extend knowledge about African American women leaders. The experiences and perceptions, both positive and negative, shared by the study participants

provided insights about their career advancement in addressing the problem of the lack of African American women in senior leadership positions at the GS-15 and SES level in the targeted health service agency. There are a limited number of African American women in senior leadership roles within federal health services. I found few, if any, recent studies that explored the career advancement of African American women in health services from their own experiences and perspectives. Most of the literature was focused on the lack of African American women in other sectors, such as business and academia, as well as the lack of women, in general, in senior leadership roles, and did not specify women from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds.

To ensure the interpretations did not exceed the data, findings, and scope of this study, I conducted a transcendental phenomenology approach, which enabled me as the sole researcher to collect the data via semistructured interviews as well as analyze and interpret the data based on the participants' responses.

Research Question 1 was: What are the lived experiences of African American women leaders who have attained a senior leadership position? The negative experiences I found in relation to this question were that career advancement into a senior leadership position was not easy, denial of opportunities was prevalent, the journey included lateral moves and not a straight path, and challenges were imposed by management and through self-infliction. Participant experiences were consistent with previous studies that reported that while barriers exist, women can penetrate them under certain conditions and increase their probability of being promoted to senior-level positions (Carli & Eagly, 2016). Reported by Carli and Eagly (2016), a labyrinth implies that women face

challenges throughout their careers from the time they began their leadership journey until they achieve their goal. As a result, the career path for women can be viewed as a labyrinth whereby advancement is a challenging, yet attainable, endeavor (Carli & Eagly, 2016). Hewlett and Wingfield (2015) expressed that African American women are prepared and able to lead; however, many are stalled in their careers regardless of having determination and qualifications. Half of the participants expressed that in the pursuit for leadership roles, they were passed over for positions for which they met the qualifications.

According to Sanchez-Hucles and Davis (2010), career trajectory involves challenges, indirect attacks, and endeavors into unknown territory rather than traveling a straight path to senior leadership. All the study participants shared stories about the challenges they faced by either individuals in leadership positions or through self-infliction, which included apprehension, immaturity, lack of background knowledge, and being stuck in their blind spot. Aligned with findings from Murray's (2016) study, participants shared that lack of encouragement and support from agency leaders hindered advancement to senior leadership positions. Moreover, the participants voiced the importance of agency leaders to impart positive perspectives, support employee development, and offer information and insight to aspiring leaders from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds (Murray, 2016). Similarly, findings from Key et al. (2012) showed that in comparison to Caucasian women, women of color received less assistance in their achieving leadership positions and career advancement.

The positive experiences identified were the importance of mentorship and networks, supportive leaders, and perseverance/self-determination to achieve leadership goals. Seven participants described having individuals to help navigate their career. Studies finding conducted by Gamble and Turner (2015) and Leck and Orser (2013) identified mentoring as a key component in the career development for women to advance to leadership positions. In the study conducted by Davis and Maldonado (2015), participants expressed that mentors and sponsors were essential in their career advancement. Several African American women leaders in this current study described having supportive leaders, both male and female, and from all ethnicities who showed interest in them and were willing to assist them. Gamble and Turner (2015) highlighted that support and opportunities from current and former managers played an essential role in the careers of African American women leaders in postsecondary institutions. In this current study, while the participants did not verbalize the word sponsor when describing supportive leaders, one could categorize a supportive leader as a sponsor. In previous studies (Carbajal, 2018; Holton & Dent, 2016; Travis et al., 2013), findings showed that sponsors can help guide aspiring women leaders in their career advancement as well as develop their knowledge, skills, and abilities. Similarly, in the study conducted by Sexton et al. (2014), women executives in the healthcare industry attributed sponsors as the reason in which they attained their CEO positions.

All participants summarized their lived experiences and how they attained a senior leadership position regardless of the many challenges placed in their paths. This finding aligned with a recent study by Roberts, Mayo, Ely, and Thomas (2018), that

explored the underrepresentation of African American women in an organization's senior leadership roles. Narratives from successful African American women indicated that perseverance was essential in beating the odds and reaching their career goals (Roberts et al., 2018). In addition, Davis and Maldonado (2015) concluded that, through perseverance and tenacity, the African American women leaders demonstrated their ability to climb the organizational ladder in their respective fields.

Figure 1 displays a relationship map which connects the themes that emerged for RQ1. The single arrows reflect the seven themes that emerged from the participant interviews to elicit their lived experiences of the African American women leaders. The figure also shows the relationship between several themes: (a) no easy attainment and challenges, (b) no easy attainment and lateral moves, (c) denied promotions and challenges, and (d) supportive leaders and importance of mentorship and networks. These relationships are depicted with double arrows.

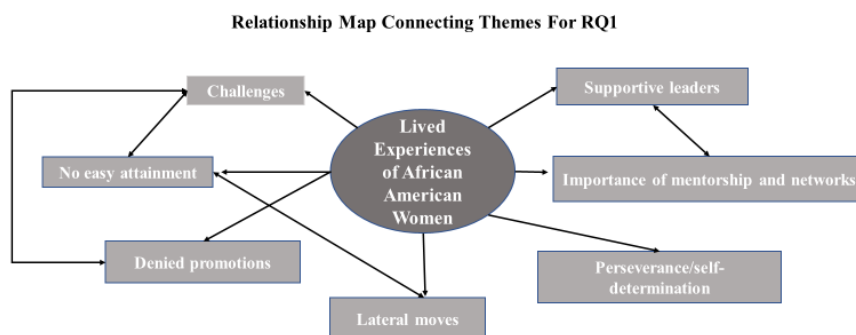


Figure 1: Relationship map connecting themes for RQ1.

Research Question 2 was: What are the perceptions of African American women leaders who have attained a senior leadership position? The negative perceptions I found in relation to this question were barriers to advancement (including five subthemes), glass ceiling, stereotypes (including one subtheme), and implicit bias encumbering career advancement. The majority of the participants reported their views on barriers which they perceived could hinder one's career advancements. The first barrier, denial of opportunities, was reported by five participants. In the Catalyst (2004) report, African American women were more likely than all women from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds to feel that advancement opportunities had declined rather than improved. In this current study, three of the five participants perceived denial of opportunities due to either their race or gender identities. In the study conducted by Rosser-Mims and Palmer (2009), findings showed that African Americans were denied opportunities due to race, ethnicity, and cultural identities.

The second barrier to advancement was geographic limitations. Several participants felt that greater opportunities were available at the agency's headquarter location in Maryland. Another participant perceived a change in duty station did not offer work-life flexibility. Aligned with findings from Gamble and Turner (2015), upward mobility may require changes in residence, work colleagues, and way of living.

Family obligation was the third barrier to advancement. Three participants felt parental and spousal responsibilities could hinder one's willingness to pursue leadership goals. This finding aligns with previous studies that revealed women felt conflicted about leaving their children when they go to work (AAUW, 2016) and achieving a

balance between family and work responsibilities (Gamble and Turner, 2015; Akpinar-Sposito, 2013). Moreover, Key et al. (2012) suggested that workplace politics and culture that encourages the notion of a two-parent family could potentially hinder career growth for women from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds.

Lack of feedback emerged as one of the subthemes to barriers to advancement. Two participants cited that honest feedback could help individuals grow and develop in their careers. This finding aligns with a report written by Walton, Murphy and Ryan (2015) that cited critical feedback is an effective tool for development and improvement. The literature review also aligned with the view that lack of higher-graded positions as a perceived career advancement barrier. This finding is consistent with the study by Murray (2016), in which participants suggested that organizational constraints limited their advancement to SES positions because these positions did not become available regularly. The opportunity for SES was limited because individuals in career SES members do not change position or retire from federal service, which thereby limits the chances for men and women from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds of becoming career SES members (Murray, 2016). This current study advances the literature by elucidating how the lack of higher-graded positions may impede the career advancement of African American women to senior leadership positions.

Participants described their perception of the glass ceiling being prevalent in the workplace. Participants felt the glass ceiling contributed to that the underrepresentation of African Americans, specifically women, in senior leadership. One participant, Minnie, felt that the glass ceiling is being shaken since more women are filling senior leadership

roles. The literature supports the glass ceiling perception. The glass ceiling was identified as a contributing factor that hinders women from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds from achieving leadership positions (Beckwith et al., 2016; Gamble and Turner, 2015; Key et al., 2012). Barnes (2017) concluded that women have been able to scale down the glass ceiling and that women from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds are chipping away at the concrete ceiling slowly.

Stereotypes was a major theme that emerged from five of the eight participants. Stereotypes, such as the way African American women communicate and carry themselves, were voiced. In the Catalyst (2004) study, African American women described stereotypes about being combative which they perceived were based on interpretations of a direct communication style. Other negative characterizations given to African American women included having bad attitudes, being poor performers, and being academically inferior to Caucasians. These findings are similar to those from Rosette et al. (2016) in which African American women were stereotyped as incompetent and having an attitude. Reynolds-Dobbs et al. (2008) reported that African American women in leadership positions, who work beyond an 8-hour/day work schedule and assume additional duties, are perceived as exceptional members of their race. In the study conducted by Abrams, Javier, Maxwell, Belgrave, and Nguyen (2015), one of the themes from discussions with African American women entailed “being Black and a woman: perceived social inferiority.” The participants voiced their views and feelings about the perceptions of inferiority in comparisons to other ethnic group and believed that society did not see them as educated Black women.

One specific stereotype that several participants did not want to be labeled as was an angry black woman. According to Reynolds-Dobbs et al. (2008), an angry and aggressive African American are two qualities that do not exemplify leadership characteristics. In the findings reported by Rosette et al. (2016), angry was the most common perception (8.3%) given to African American women, which was higher than those given to Caucasian women (1.0%) and Asian American women (1.2%). In the recent article by Roberts et al. (2018), they discussed that successful African American women must be mindful of their emotional expressions and not appear too ambitious and intimidating, as well as an angry black woman.

In this current study, participants perceived implicit bias as the basis for individual behavior. Two participants highlighted that Caucasians appeared shocked and surprised when they saw an African American woman conducting inspections and hearing her speaking abilities. In the Holder et al. (2015) study, perceptions about an African American woman intellectual ability and achievements in communication was coined the metacommunication of disbelief and surprise. These perceptions can create an adverse work environment and can negatively impact the performance evaluation processes which influences job promotion and salary decisions (Holder et al. 2015). One participant felt that unspoken biases against women of African American descent dated back to the time of slavery. Sullivan-Bissett (2015) reported that many people exhibit implicit race bias, and that such bias affects one's belief as well as how the world is perceived.

Moreover, another participant felt implicit bias and negative treatment were targeted against all women of African descent regardless of their cultural identity. Cheeks (2018) concluded that bias can have tangible career outcomes for African American women. This current study advances the literature by elucidating how the perceptions of implicit bias are relevant to African American women who have attained a leadership position.

The study participants identified positive perceptions about strategies for advancement (including four subthemes) and the importance of investing in others to achieve their career goals. All participants offered various strategies they felt aspiring African American women should employ to ascend the organizational ladder. Beckwith et al. (2016) cited that the failure to make strategic employment decisions based on career path and individual responsibility play critical roles in the career advancement of African American women to leadership positions. Five participants spoke about volunteering for different assignments and national projects. This finding aligns with a strategy identified in a recent study conducted by Gathers-Whatley and Chase (2018) that explores opportunities for minority senior executives in the federal government. One of the participants highlighted the importance of volunteering for every assignment and opportunities (Gathers-Whatley & Chase, 2018). Similarly, Adeseogun et al. (2015) reported that volunteering for activities that enhances access to individuals and situations was a strategic tool utilized for African American women who strived to achieve higher leadership positions.

Performing details and serving in an acting capacity was voiced by three of the participants. This finding aligns with Beckwith et al. (2016) and Davis and Maldonado (2015) studies that emphasized women should be placed in high-visibility assignments that will strengthen their career advancement opportunities. These findings also align with the subtheme, visibility/be seen, that emerged from this current study. Specifically, Wyatt and Silvester (2015) identified the need to achieve visibility and to be seen by senior leaders was essential for career ascension. In this same study, increased visibility was perceived as having both positive and negative consequences for career ascension because participant felt more scrutiny than their Caucasian colleagues and as a result saw the need to put in additional effort and time to receive the same credit (Wyatt & Silvester, 2015).

All eight participants felt that aspiring African American women need to take extra steps to ascend the career ladder. This finding was not considered in Chapter 2. However, some examples of extra steps voiced by the participants included having an advanced degree, working twice as hard, putting in additional hours, and adapting to office lingo and culture. Beckwith et al. (2016) emphasized that more is necessary for African American women leaders to be successful. Durr and Harvey Wingfield (2011) reported that African American women professionals felt they needed to transform themselves in order to feel welcomed and accepted in the workplace.

Previous research that discussed the perception of African American women leaders investing in others was not considered in Chapter 2. However, participants indicated that helping other aspiring African American women ascend the organizational

ladder was essential. A key finding from Davis and Maldonado (2015) study, pay it forward, revealed that participants stressed the importance of helping aspiring African American women to enhance their growth and success as a future leader. Moreover, Pace (2018) reported that women from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds serving as mentors, advisors, and role models, can provide aspiring women leaders with the tactical knowledge necessary to navigate their organizational ladder.

Figure 2 displays a relationship map which connects the themes that emerged for RQ2. The single arrows reflect the six themes that emerged from the participant interviews to elicit their perceptions of the African American women leaders. The figure also shows the relationship between barriers to advancement with three themes: (a) glass ceiling, (b) stereotypes, and (c) implicit bias. The figure also shows a relationship between the strategies for advancement and invest in others themes. The four relationships are depicted with double arrows between each theme.

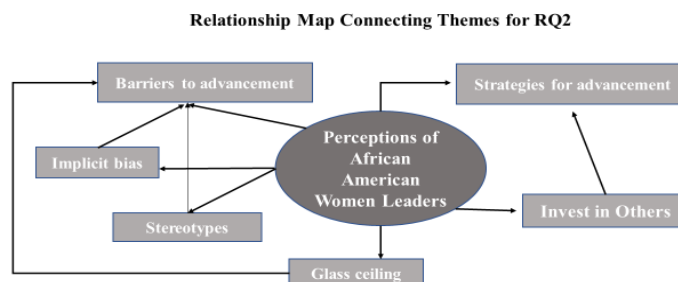


Figure 2: Relationship map connecting themes for RQ2

Research Question 3 was: In what ways did the intersectionality of race and gender contribute to leadership experiences? From this research question, four themes emerged from participant interviews: (a) race challenges, (b) microaggression, (c) invisibility of African American women, and (d) dealing with racism. These themes illustrate how race and gender identities contribute to the leadership experiences of African American women achieving senior leadership positions in their agency.

There were mixed responses from the participants regarding their feelings on if they were faced with challenges due to their race or their gender. Two participants believed challenges were based on both race and gender identities. Five of the eight participants expressed that challenges were due to race only. Participants noted that since more women were in leadership positions, they did not endure gender challenges. Another participant felt that individuals would appreciate her knowledge and expertise if she was a Caucasian woman. In contrast, participant Beulah attributed challenges due to her gender identity since the demographics of where she worked was predominately African American. Barnes (2017) reported that in the context of African American women as leaders, they endure challenges related to their identity that can become challenges to their career advancement goals. The experiences from the participants who identified one identity are contrary to some of the literature regarding both race and gender contributing to leadership experiences.

Most of the participants shared microaggression experiences and being treated differently as an African American woman. One participant expressed how individuals questioned her because she was an African American woman in a leadership position.

Moreover, participants also expressed experiencing a higher level of scrutiny. These findings are consistent with Catalyst (2004) and Holder et al. (2015) whereby African American women expressed that their authority was often questioned by those they interacted with at work and outside their work environment. Similarly, findings from AAUW (2017) showed that women leaders experience resistance when their leadership style is different from female stereotypes.

The theme, invisibility of African American women, emerged from five of the eight participant interviews. One participant, Beulah, expressed that African American women are making progress and present in senior leadership positions. This finding disconfirms previous study findings. For example, Beckwith et al. (2016) and Johnson (2015) concluded that there is a dearth of African American women in executive positions in comparison to their counterparts. Divergent from Beulah's belief, four participants expressed that while women are in senior leadership positions, African American women are absent from such positions. Sesko and Biernat (2010) summarized that in comparison to other groups, African American women are less visible in leadership positions in the workplace. African American women executives interviewed in the recent study conducted by Smith, Watkins, Ladge, and Carlton (2018) revealed that while they were physically visible, they felt cognitively invisible meaning their underrepresentation in leadership was highly visible in the workplace. Similarly, Barnes (2017) indicated that for those African American women who hold leadership positions, they are more visible since few exist. In the Holder et al. (2015) study, participants

expressed that they experienced being invisible by Caucasian men during meetings and being ignored and dismissed by others.

The final theme, dealing with racism, was not considered in Chapter 2 but expressed by four participants. Participant Carrie described being able to alter the perspective of a supervisor characterized as racist. Other participants shared stories about racism, either blatant or covert, in the workplace. Participant Minnie was hesitant on labeling acts as racism but acknowledged that they could be interpreted as race-based acts. This information discovered in this current study may allow others to understand how one deals with racism and race-based actions, which may contribute to the leadership experiences of African American women in senior leadership positions.

Figure 3 displays a relationship map which connects the themes that emerged for RQ3. The single arrows reflect the four themes that emerged from the participant interviews to elicit in what ways did the intersection of race and gender contribute to their leadership experiences. The figure also shows the relationship between race challenges and two themes: (a) microaggression and (b) dealing with racism, which is depicted by double arrows.

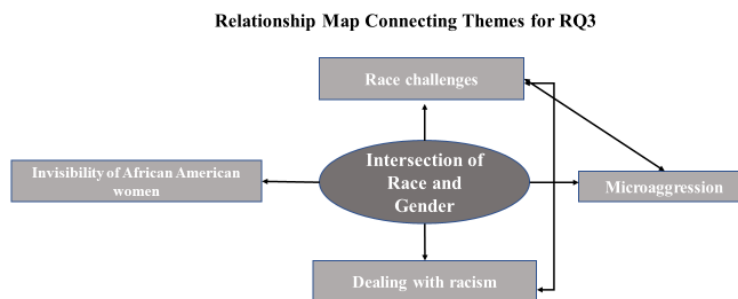


Figure 3: Relationship map connecting themes for RQ3.

In this study, I explored the lived experiences and perceptions of African American women in their career advancement to senior leadership in a health service agency. Given the scope of the study, I used SCCT by Lent et al. (2006) and intersectionality by Crenshaw (1991). The three core tenets of SCCT are self-efficacy beliefs, outcome expectations, and personal goals (Bounds, 2017; Lent & Brown, 2013; Lent et al., 2006; Scheuermann et al., 2014). Participants described self-efficacy characteristics in their ability to advance to senior leadership positions despite the challenges and barriers, real or perceived, they faced. The participants shared their thoughts and perspectives of achieving a senior leadership position (outcome expectations). The participants described their personal goals of becoming a senior leader, and they identified strategies to advancement as well as their obligation they felt in helping other aspiring African American women attain their leadership goals.

The three core tenets of intersectionality are (a) social identities are multiple, interdependent, and intersecting instead of independent and one dimensional; (b)

individuals from marginalized and oppressed groups are the focal point; and (c) various social identities at the micro level intersect with structural factors, such as racism and sexism, at the macro level (Bowleg, 2012; Dill & Zambrana, 2009; Gopaldas, 2013). The intersectionality of race and gender influenced their leadership development and potentially altered how individuals perceived them based on race and gender identities. During the interviews, African American women were the focal point of the study, and they shared their lived experiences and perceptions from the vantage point of two separate identities, both race and gender. This transcendental phenomenological approach allowed the participants to share their lived experiences and perceptions in their own words through semistructured interviews. Dealing with racism, however, was voiced more so than sexism. The majority of participants felt that their gender identity had not been impacted because of the increase of women in senior leadership positions.

Limitations of the Study

Several limitations constrained this phenomenological study. All the participants were African American women in a senior leadership position at the GS-15 and SES level. Therefore, this study was limited by race, gender, and position of senior leadership in the targeted health service agency. Responses from the eight study participants who were purposively selected to participate in this study may not represent the experiences and perceptions of African American women leaders in a health service agency. Because of the small sample size, the research findings cannot be generalized to the general population. This limitation prevents representation from all African American women in these positions. The African American women who volunteered for this study self-

reported their lived experiences and personal views of how they attained a senior leadership position. The semistructured interviews were conducted via face-to-face and Skype. Utilizing Skype may have limited my ability to observe nonverbal cues fully and build rapport with the participants whereby comprehensive and thorough responses were provided. Moreover, the different interview approaches may have altered perceptions of responses and analysis. Finally, my own biases may have been a limitation. To mitigate researcher bias, I employed member checking which allowed the participants to verify the accuracy of information and make any adjustments if needed. I also used a journal to annotate my thoughts and feelings during the data collection and analysis processes.

Recommendations

The findings of this study provide fundamental knowledge about the phenomenon of the underrepresentation of African American women in senior leadership in a public health service agency. The study explored the lived experiences and perceptions of African American women who have achieved a senior leadership position. One recommendation is to continue research studies that focuses on the lived experiences and perceptions of African American women leaders in this sector since there is a paucity of literature about African American women in health services.

The second recommendation is to explore the lived experiences and perceptions of aspiring African American women who have not attained a senior leadership position. The underrepresentation of African American women leaders is a problem. Therefore, conducting future studies that explore those aspiring to ascend the organizational ladder may help to uncover barriers to advancement and themes that have hindered ascension.

The knowledge gained from these studies could help develop strategies and initiatives that foster career advancement for aspiring African American women.

The third recommendation is for future researchers to extend this study to women from other diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds, such as Hispanics and Asian Americans. An underrepresentation of women leaders from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds exist and exploring the lived experiences and perceptions of those from these groups could promote greater diversity in leadership workforce.

The fourth recommendation is to change the research questions and theoretical framework that focuses on issues of race. The experiences of dealing with racism and challenges due to race were expressed by some of the participants in the study. While the focus of race as an independent identity was not within the scope of the current study, some of the participant's responses during the interviews touched on this issue. Thus, this area may be worth investigating in a future study.

Implications for Positive Social Change

This qualitative phenomenological study explored the lived experiences and perceptions of African American women in positions at the senior leadership level. The study design focused on the intersectionality of race and gender that contributed to the career advancement of African American women into the GS-15 and SES levels. Research on the underrepresentation, with a focus on the intersectionality, and the career advancement of African American women in health service organizations are not well studied. Since the study provided a platform to hear the voices of African American women, the data collected helps to fill the gap in the dearth of research about this group

in leadership positions. The findings contribute to the knowledge on strategies used and challenges faced by African American women desiring to advance their career to senior leadership in health services.

The results of this study can bring positive social change on different levels. This study is significant because it highlights that African American women have reached senior leadership in the health services agency, and the representation of this group at this level contributes to positive social change. Individuals could benefit from the knowledge shared by the participants to gain a deeper understanding of how one may advance in their career. The lived experiences of the African American women leaders in this study revealed their career advancement was not easy, they lateraled at the same grade before advancing, and faced challenges that were imposed by either management or self-inflicted. The stories shared by the participants may enable aspiring African American women to prepare their leadership development journeys effectively. Having information on what others have experienced, both positive and negative, may provide the knowledge necessary for individuals so that their journey is not faced with barriers and challenges. In addition to this enhanced insight, individuals may be inspired by the success of those who attained senior leadership. The importance of mentorship and sponsor, supportive leaders, and self-determination were key factors for consideration. I am in hope that the stories of the participants reveal to aspiring African American women leaders that they can achieve their goals and break the concrete ceiling. The career advancement of more African American women into senior leadership will provide the necessary role models,

mentors, and sponsors, and aspire and motivate other women to pursue leadership opportunities.

There is a potential impact for positive social change at the organizational level. Although the success of African American women is lauded, agency leaders must continue to advance policies and practices that foster a diverse leadership workforce. Participants acknowledged that more women are attaining senior leadership roles but emphasized that the representation of African American women is still lacking. Moreover, the in-depth stories shared by the participants may be instrumental in elucidating the negative perceptions commonly associated with African American women and reducing biases and stereotypes. The results of this study may highlight the need for diversity and cultural competency training for agency leaders. The positive social change impact from this study would include sharing the results to agency leaders, including the diversity/inclusion committee. When the viewpoints of African American women are shared with agency leaders to aid in the development of strategies and initiatives, the representation of African American women in senior leadership can be increased. The results may also bring to light the need for more leadership development opportunities for aspiring African American women leaders, such as detail, national projects, and high-visibility assignments, that expose them to senior leaders who can see the value they bring to the agency. Significantly, this study may reveal to senior leaders the importance of not only serving in the capacity as mentors and sponsors but by promoting diversity through earnest commitments of investing in aspiring African American women leaders.

This study may have implications for positive social change at the society level. My goal is to publish the results of this study and make available to the participants, study population, agency leaders, as previously noted, and the health services community so that they become conscientious of the experiences and perspectives of African American women leaders. To provide further awareness of the findings of this study, I plan to share the results at local and national leadership seminars and conferences. Combining insight gathered from SCCT and intersectionality with the findings from this study may have significant implication in guiding the career paths of African American women into leadership in health services as well as other sectors where underrepresentation exists.

Conclusions

In conclusion, this research study was a rewarding experience by having the opportunity to hear stories from inspiring and determined African American women who were able to break the concrete ceiling and attain senior leadership positions. When the voices are heard from those who climbed the hierarchical ladder and reached pinnacle positions, their experiences and perceptions can help others become successful. The findings of this study show that work must continue to address the problem of the underrepresentation of African American women at the senior leadership level.

The participants voiced their experiences and perceptions, as well as how the intersection of race and gender, impacted their career advancement to senior leadership. These eight phenomenal women never gave up and imparted themes that revealed the journey was not easy and faced with barriers and challenges, yet they stayed the course

and were able to achieve their goals. The study confirmed strategies that are cited in the literature that included mentoring and networking relationships, as well as supportive leaders and self-determination to enhance one's opportunity of achieving senior leadership.

By providing a platform for each participant to speak, agency leaders may better understand the journey African American women endure to achieve senior leadership positions. The findings from this study may serve as a resourceful tool for key decision-makers to improve leadership opportunities and provide a supportive environment for African American women to enhance leadership growth. Agency leaders in health services should continue to act and contribute to creating a diverse leadership workforce that promotes positive social change.

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Appendix A: Interview Protocol Guide

Introduction: Thank you in advance for your willingness to participate in this study. The purpose of this interview is to explore your lived experiences and perceptions as a woman who hold a senior leadership position in a public health services agency. The interview questions are designed to address whether and how race and gender impact your career advancement. This interview will last approximately one hour, and I will be using a digital recorder. I would like to seek your permission to audio-record the interview to ensure that validity and reliability of the data collected. All information gathered during this interview, including your name, will be confidential. This study and your participation are completely voluntary. There is minimal risk to the participants' privacy and confidentiality. These risks are minimized by proactive measures to ensure the protections of the participant's privacy and confidentiality. There is no compensation for this interview. I will not use your personal information for any purpose outside this research project. Data will be kept secure by me in a locked file cabinet and electronic data will be password protected. Do you have any questions?

Before we begin, please answer the following demographic questions:

Demographics

Please indicate your current age group?

- a. 21-30
- b. 31-40
- c. 41-50
- d. 51-60
- e. Over 60

What is the highest level of education you have attained?

- a. High school education
- b. Associates degree
- c. Bachelor's degree
- d. Master's degree
- e. Doctorate or PhD

How do you culturally identify?

- a. African American, born in the United States, never resided in Africa
- b. African in America, U.S. legal resident or citizen, born in African country of origin
- c. African in America, U.S. legal resident or citizen, born in non-African country of origin
- d. Jamaican
- e. Nigerian
- f. Ethiopian
- g. Other Caribbean country of origin
- h. Other not listed, describe _____

How long you have worked as a federal employee?

Interview Questions

1. At what point did your career transition into leadership? How long did it take you to reach a leadership position?
2. What is your current position and role?
3. Reflecting on your career as an HHS civilian in a health service agency, describe your personal experience of career advancement, such as ease, challenges, or other lessons you learned to reach a senior leadership position?
4. Describe, from your experience, any specific barriers to career advancement in the HHS civilian workforce.
5. Reflecting on your career as an HHS civilian in a health service agency, what single event or experience most influenced your career?
 - a. What other events or experiences significantly influenced your career?
 - b. How so?
6. How has your race and gender shaped your career advancement as a leader?
 - a. How has your gender influenced or affected your career?
 - b. How has your race influenced or affected your career?
7. Are there other factors that may affect career advancement for women of African descent in the HHS workforce?

- a. Given the diversity among women of African descent in America, do you feel some factors effect certain ethnicities of Black women more than others? Like what? How so?
8. What advice would you give to women of African descent aspiring to advance in their careers with HHS health service agency?
9. What lessons have you learned as an African descent in a leadership position?
10. What lessons have you learned as a woman of African descent in a leadership position?
11. Do you feel you most often are faced with challenges due to your race or your gender? Explain.

Thank you, again, for your time and participation in this interview.

Note. Interview questions modeled from “A Phenomenological Study on the Leadership Development of African American Women Executives in Academia and Business” by Davis (2012) and “Army Federal Careers: A Phenomenological Study of African American Leaders’ Perception of Career Advancement” by Fuller (2016).

Appendix B: Participant Recruitment Invitation

Dear _____,

I am currently enrolled at Walden University, completing the requirements for a doctoral program. As a requirement for the Ph.D. in Health Services Administration, I am conducting a qualitative phenomenological research study with the hopes of exploring the experiences and perceptions of African American women in senior leadership in a health service agency. The requirements to participate in this study are that participants must be an African American woman, currently employed in a senior leadership position at the GS-15 or SES level in a health service agency. Participant must also work in either headquarters or a field office, located in the continental United States.

I am hopeful that you will consider participating in this study. Your participation is voluntary, and you have the right to withdraw from the study at any time without explanation. Your personal identity and specific place of employment will not be disclosed at any time during or after participation of this study. You will choose a fictitious name that will be utilized throughout the study guaranteeing your anonymity and confidentiality. Therefore, the study will be at minimal risk to you. You have assurance that I will act ethically in accordance to Walden University's regulations and guidelines and the school's Institutional Review Board (IRB) requirements.

The study will involve a face-to-face interview in person at a public location of your choice or via Skype, which will be audio recorded and should last no longer 60 minutes/one hour. It is my hope and intention that I will conduct the interview during the months of November or December pending your availability for a time convenient for you.

In addition to the interview process, I will ask you to take time to review the narrative from you interview, where you will have the opportunity to make corrections, changes, or additions that you feel are necessary. You will have one week to complete your review.

I would be grateful for a response via e-mail or telephone to let me know whether you would be interested in participating in this study.

Sincerely,

LaTonya M. Mitchell

Doctoral Candidate

_____@waldenu.edu

_____@yahoo.com

Appendix C: Audit Trail

The audit trail summarizes the steps I took post-proposal approval, which includes data collection and analysis for this transcendental phenomenological study.

Completion Dates	Specific Tasks	Notes
September 21, 2018	Proposal Approved by Entire Committee	
September 28, 2018	Proposal Oral Defense	Chair and Committee Member participated. They provided constructive feedback and advise to consider during data analysis process. Also provided feedback on additional topics to include in the dissertation. Passed oral defense presentation.
September 29, 2018	Submitted IRB Application to Chair.	Chair made comments on application. Updated application, and chair approved. Chair advised to submit IRB application.
September 30, 2018	Submitted IRB application to Walden IRB.	Application was under Expediated Review.
October 22, 2018	Received IRB Approval	IRB requested updates to initial application. Resubmitted application on October. Approved after 2 nd submission.
October 23, 2018	Submitted Confidentiality Agreement form to Third-Party Transcription Company - Rev.com	Agreement signed and returned on October 24, 2018
October 24 – November 13, 2018	Emailed Participant Recruitment Invitations to Potential Participants	Secured eight participants.
October 30, 2018	Purchased NVivo 12 Plus Software	Received 14-day trial. Received additional 30-day to evaluate software.
November 5 – November 19, 2018	Conducted Interviews	Five interviews conducted face-to-face in private offices or conference rooms in non-work settings, and three interviews conducted via Skype.

November 5- 8, 2018 and November 16-19, 2018	Stored Consent Forms, Interview Notes, and Pseudo-Name Card	Stored study participants in separate envelope and secured in locked file cabinet
November 7 – November 19, 2018	Uploaded Audio Recording Files from Digital Recorder to Rev.com for Transcription	
November 8 – November 19, 2018	Received Transcriptions of Interviews from Third-Party Transcription Company	Transcriptions received in Microsoft Word format. Reviewed audio transcript and word document for accuracy and completeness.
November 11, 2018	Began Writing Chapter 4	
November 11 – November 19, 2018	Sent Transcriptions to Study Participants for Member Checking.	Study participants given opportunity to make corrections, changes, or additions, and they were provided one week to review word document transcripts.
November 21 – December 7, 2018	Analyzed Data	Themes emerged for each research question. Used NVivo to conduct data analysis
December 7 – December 14, 2018	Wrote Results Section	
December 15, 2018	Completed Chapter 4	
December 15, 2018	Emailed Themes to Study Participants	Sent separate email to each participant outlining the themes and subthemes that emerged from the data analysis process.
December 16, 2018	Submitted Chapter 4 to Chair for Review and Approval	Made edits and provided a new submission on December 18, 2018
December 16, 2018	Began Writing Chapter 5	
December 29, 2018	Completed Chapter 5	
December 30, 2018	Reviewed Entire Dissertation	
December 30, 2018	Submitted Dissertation to Chair for Review and Approval	