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Exploring the Career Advancement Experience of Black Women on Their Journey to Executive Levels in Large American Corporations

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EXPLORING THE CAREER ADVANCEMENT EXPERIENCE OF BLACK WOMEN ON
THEIR JOURNEY TO EXECUTIVE LEVELS IN LARGE AMERICAN CORPORATIONS

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ABSTRACT

EXPLORING THE CAREER ADVANCEMENT EXPERIENCE OF BLACK WOMEN ON THEIR JOURNEY TO EXECUTIVE LEVELS IN LARGE AMERICAN CORPORATIONS

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Corporations began hiring Black people into management positions in the 1960s and 1970s following the passage of the Civil Rights Act (1964) which made it unlawful to discriminate in hiring based on race, gender, religion, or country of origin. Black men were the first to benefit from this change and Black women began to appear in entry level management roles in the 1980s. Forty years later, there have only been four Black women CEOs in the history of the Fortune 1000, the largest American companies based on reported revenues. This level of representation is closer to zero than 1% despite over 6% of the American population self-reporting as Black or African American women. The purpose of this study was to explore the career advancement journey of Black women who achieved the executive level in Fortune 1000 companies to identify what events were most critical in helping or hindering their career advancement. The research design was an exploratory, qualitative study using critical incident technique (Flanagan, 1954). The study included 20 participants, Black women who had achieved executive level in Fortune 1000 companies with a minimum of 15 years of management experience. The analysis of the data revealed two overarching themes across the participants: the experience of being the first and/or only woman, Black person, or Black woman and a small group of sustaining beliefs shared by the Black women. These beliefs served to sustain them over their career advancement journeys. Consistent with the critical incident methodology, the

antecedents or what led to the incidents, the incidents themselves, and the outcomes of the incidents were all analyzed for themes. Study data were reviewed to identify practical implications and recommendations for Black women leaders, people who advocate for Black women in leadership, leadership in companies, and people in positions in diversity, equity, and inclusion. This dissertation is available in open access at AURA (https://aura.antioch.edu/) and OhioLINK ETD Center (https://etd.ohiolink.edu).

Keywords: Black women, leadership, career advancement, intersectionality, first and only, critical incident technique, CIT, Fortune 1000

Dedication

I dedicate my dissertation to parents, Turner Smith, Jr. and Pattie Young-Gresham, and the many Black women that have come before me, beside me, and are yet to claim their dreams. Turner Smith believed I could accomplish any and everything I set my sights on. Pattie Young-Gresham invested her everything in me so that I might have opportunities not available to her. Their love, belief in me, coaching, and lifelong experience were a lighthouse for me. They were always available to show me a way, but not the way, and helped me to see the rocks in the way. I know they have continued to guide me from their heavenly spaces. This life, this project, would not be possible without them. I am eternally grateful to the many Black women that came before me in all capacities. They made it possible for me to be me, all of me. The Black women that came along side me encouraged me, supported me, coached me, showed me options and alternatives that fit me, and worked for me. There is a special place in my heart for the Black women that are yet to identify or claim their dreams. My heart beats with excitement for them as they discover their dreams and claim them. I have a deep love, respect, and admiration for all of you and thank you for the unending inspiration you have provided me. Thank you.

Acknowledgements

I give thanks to God for walking with me and carrying me when needed on the larger journey called life. I thank God for allowing me the privilege to pursue a Doctor of Philosophy in Leadership and Change with a focus on Black women leaders. I acknowledge the many Black women leaders that came before me and allowed me access to their life stories and their way of being. These women inspired me, coached me, pushed me, pulled me, prayed for me, cheered me on, and let me know in their own ways when I needed to adjust, in ways that were both big and small. May this project be a gift of affirmation, enlightenment, and provide a sense of community. I am highly appreciative and grateful for "Team Pam," the many family members, friends, and professionals that enabled me to be me. They have supported me on this PhD journey and in my previous endeavors that made this achievement possible. I want to thank the participants in this study for taking the time from their busy lives to participate and for trusting me with their stories. I thank my dissertation committee for their guidance and support. Dr. Lize Booysen, DBL, my dissertation chair, was exactly what I needed, a compassionate accountability partner on the PhD journey. Dr. Harriet Schwartz, my methodologist, pushed me to stay true to my constructivist-interpretivist approach to this research and kept me on a methodological learning journey. Dr. Kathleen Brown, my external reader—I thank her for taking the interest in me and my work, and for making the time in her life to contribute to this work.

Table of Contents

List of Tables

List of Figures

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Background and Context

It has been almost 60 years since the landmark Civil Rights Act (1964) became law in the United States. It made it unlawful to discriminate in hiring based on gender, race, religion, or country of origin. Corporations began hiring Black candidates, primarily men, into management roles in the late 1960s and early 1970s (Dickens & Dickens, 1982). Black male upward mobility in management jobs far exceeded Black women in the decades that followed (S. M. Collins, 1997a). It was not until the 1990s when Black women established a meaningful presence in entry level and middle management roles in large corporations in the United States (Davidson, 1997). Black women remain significantly underrepresented in executive-level positions in large American corporations (R. Thomas et al., 2020).

Fortune 1000 companies, the largest American corporations as measured by publicly reported revenue, have a dismal history of appointing Black women to the position of CEO. In the history of the Fortune 1000 companies, there have been only four Black women to serve in permanent CEO positions and one in a seven-month interim appointment: Ursula Burns of Xerox (2009–2016), Lisa Wardell of Adtalem Global Education (2016–2019), Roz Brewer of the Walgreens Boots Alliance (since 2021), and Thasunda Brown Duckette of TIAA (since 2021). Mary Winston served as interim CEO of Bed Bath & Beyond (May 2019–November 2019). In 2020, White men held 57 and 68% of vice-presidential and C-suite positions in corporate America, respectively (R. Thomas et al., 2020).

The sustained low level of representation invited a deeper exploration of the pipeline of qualified Black women for Fortune 1000 CEO positions. The 2020 U.S. Census reported over 300 million people, and over 13% of that population identified as Black or African American

(United States Census Bureau, 2020). If it is assumed that half of the people that identified as Black or African American were women, this means that there were 20 million Black women in America. *Fortune* magazine reported the age range for the majority of Fortune 500 CEOs was 45–65. The data on Fortune 501 to 1000 was not available so for the purpose of this exercise it was assumed to be the same. It is a reasonable assumption that 20% of these 20 million Black women were between the ages of 45 and 65 years old. This translates to four million Black women between the age of 45 to 65 who could theoretically be considered for a Fortune 1000 CEO position based on age. It is also reasonable for this exercise to assume that only 1% of these Black women have the academic credentials, work experience, and competencies that qualify for consideration for a Fortune 1000 CEO position. This would translate to 40,000 Black women available and qualified for the 1000 CEO positions; yet in the entire history of the Fortune 1000, there have been only four Black women appointed to a permanent CEO position. The percentage of actual Black women CEOs, four out of a thousand, effectively rounds to zero. Something does not add up. Why is it that 6% of the Fortune 1000 CEOs are not Black women every year, consistent with their representation in the United States population, versus the scant number that is far closer to zero than 1%? In 2020, Black women occupied less than 2% of the vice-presidential and C-suite positions in corporations (R. Thomas et al., 2020), the positions that are the pipeline for the CEO positions. Underrepresentation above middle management levels in organizations has been and is still a key contributor to under representation at the highest executive levels. What is going on with career advancement of Black women between middle management and the CEO level in Fortune 1000 companies?

      The underrepresentation of Black women as executives has impacted Black women leaders at all leadership levels. Underrepresentation in executive level positions has influenced

the mental and physical health of the few Black women who achieved executive level positions, the education and housing options for the Black women seeking advancement beyond middle management and their families, and wealth generation for those Black families and Black organizations and communities (Costigan et al., 2020). On the surface, it appeared that Black women were the most disadvantaged due to their underrepresentation. The reality is that the entire corporate ecosystems were disadvantaged because these women were not enabled to operate at their peak performance in the most impactful leadership roles to deliver the corporate goals. Schaef (1985) wrote of the experience of being in a culture but not of the culture, referencing women's experience in the corporate culture of the 1980s. She insisted that highlighting this reality in her book was a gift that served to validate the experience of women. While Schaef's research focused on White women, her words of "being in a culture but not of a culture" ring true today for Black women leaders in large corporations. This dissertation is my gift to Black women in leadership, those who advocate for them, and all who believe that more qualified Black women should advance to the most senior executive level positions in large companies in the United States. This research study investigated the most impactful moments and events that helped or hindered the career advancement of Black women who achieved the executive level in large American companies. The goal of this study was to create a greater understanding and insight into the experience of career advancement of Black women who achieved the executive level in Fortune 1000 companies for the purpose of impacting the long-standing underrepresentation.

The remainder of this chapter provides an overview of the study. It includes a synthesis of the relevant literature, the study purpose, researcher positionality, the research questions, the study scope, and the significance of the study. Also included in this chapter is an overview of the

methodological approach, the research design including participant criteria, the recruitment strategy, and the plan for data collection, analysis, interpretation, and reporting. The chapter closes with the outline for the organization of the dissertation. The section that follows provides a synthesis of the literature.

Synthesis of the Literature

Some scholarship has focused on the career advancement of Black women leaders began to appear in the 1970s. The emergent literature on Black managers and women managers made only fleeting references to Black women (Nkomo, 1988). The early literature on Black women in leadership was disproportionately focused on the academic sector, possibly the result of a larger representation of Black women in middle and higher leadership level positions in academia versus the scant numbers in corporations.

Each decade the literature expanded in the number of publications and the venues in which the material appeared. Today, relevant content is available in journal articles, books, dissertations, podcasts, professional seminars, and webinars. The dominant themes in literature about the role of Black women in business has been the underrepresentation of Black women beyond middle management, the theoretical context for making meaning of the longstanding underrepresentation, and the experience of the Black women, their career advancement obstacles, and career success strategies.

The early research used both quantitative and qualitative methodologies. Qualitative studies with a constructivist and interpretivist leaning approach were most dominant. A constructivist approach to research means the researcher believes humans construct meaning as they engage in the world (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). A researcher with an interpretivist approach believes reality is multi-layered and complex and that a single phenomenon can have

multiple interpretations (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Key contributors to the literature on Black professional women in the United States include but were not limited to Ella Bell, the Catalyst organization, Patricia Hill Collins, Kimberly Crenshaw, Stella Nkomo, Patricia S. Parker, Ashleigh Shelby Rosette, and Anna Nicole Smith. These writers were some of the many contributors to the literature seeking to understand the experience of Black women leader career advancement in the United States. It is an honor and a privilege to contribute in any way to the space these scholars have created.

Theoretical and Conceptual Orientation

Historically, leadership theories have been based on White men and presumed to apply to all genders and races (Sims & Carter, 2019). Over time, leadership theories have shifted to be more inclusive of women. The evolution from the great man theory (Carlyle, 1841) to more democratic and feminine leadership styles characterization in theories was more representative of leadership in the 21st century (Booysen, 2020). The leadership theories identified as most relevant to this study are expectation states theory (Berger & Fisek, 1974), leadership categorization theory (Lord et al., 1984), critical race theory (D. A. Bell, 1973; Crenshaw, 1989) the theory of gendered and raced organizations (J. Acker, 1990), Black feminist theory (P. H. Collins, 2000; hooks, 1981), intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989), and the critical Whiteness theory (Garner, 2007; McIntosh, 1998).

Expectation states theory asserts that individuals have expectations of those with certain societal status attributes. The societal status attributes were inclusive of gender and race. *Critical race theory* was originally developed to analyze and challenge bias in laws and legal institutions but has become a theoretical framework applied to a vast array of troubling social problems with a common thread of bringing out subtle and insidious racist presumptions. *Leadership*

categorization theory shares similarities with expectation states theory; however, it is focused on leaders as a subset of society. The theory argues that leaders are distinguished from non-leaders when their attributes match prototypical leadership attributes (Lord et al., 1984). Prototypical leadership traits in the United States include being White and male due to historical dominance in positions of power. The idea that White males are a better choice to influence minds and govern others can be traced back to European colonization (Liu, 2021; Rosette et al., 2008). Think manager, think male (Jackson et al., 2007) and think leader, think White (Gundemir et al., 2014), have often been referenced.

Regarding the *theory of gendered and raced organizations*, Booysen and Nkomo (2006) offered an invitation to think differently in the article "Think Manager-Think (Fe)male: A South African Perspective." J. Acker (1990) and Nkomo (1992) challenged the historical perspective on leadership that assumed that organizational culture was gender and race-neutral, meaning without systemic gender or race bias. More recent literature on organizational culture has recognized that organizations are not gender or race neutral. This literature argues that organizations have loosely interrelated practices, processes, behaviors, and meanings that maintain gender and racial inequities within organizations and this defined gendered and raced organizations (S. Acker, 2013; Diehl & Dzubinski, 2016; Mills, 2002; Parker, 2003).

Black feminist theory seeks to highlight the intersecting dimensions of race and gender unique to the life experiences of Black women and argues that the experience of Black women is uniquely different from White and other women. The feminist movement explored the gender inequality of White middle-class women and promoted their rights and interests despite not declaring their focus was narrow, focused on White middle-class women. The feminist movement was not inclusive of middle-class Black women, and as a result, Black feminism was

born. *Intersectionality* sought to explain the meaning and implication of simultaneous membership in multiple social groups (Crenshaw, 1989). The literature on intersectionality focused on Black women, although it applies to other social group combinations. Intersectionality claims that the experience of a Black woman is distinctively different from the combination of a Black man and that of a White woman. I compare it to combining blue with red; the result is not blue and red, but distinctively purple.

Finally, *critical Whiteness theory* (Garner, 2007; McIntosh, 1989) was integral to understanding the experience of Black women leaders. It maintains that White privilege looks normal and natural to most people, often setting the standard. The theory suggests that many White people—including those committed to racial equality—do not recognize the benefits of being White. McIntosh considered White privilege as a daily experience of unearned over-advantage, an invisible package of unearned assets that are available to be cashed in every day. Yet, many who have it, remain oblivious to its existence. This conceptualization is helpful to understanding the environment in White-led organizations.

The Process of Career Advancement

The decision of who advances, who does not, and when, is important on an individual and an organizational level. It affects morale for the individuals involved and the organizations, individual compensation, individual behaviors, the reputation of the leaders and the corporation, and the organization's results. Meritocracy is a concept that appeared frequently in the literature on career advancement. Meritocracy describes an ideal social system in which merit, skills, and achievement alone determine the distribution of rewards (Castilla & Benard, 2010; Sealy, 2010; Son Hing et al., 2002). Many scholars characterize meritocracy as a myth, a concept that does not exist in the real world (Hathaway, 1984; Leighton, 2020; Rhode, 1996). Meritocracy in this

sense contrasts the distribution of rewards based on relationships, similarities between the distributor of the rewards and the person seeking the rewards, or some other non-merit-based factors. Despite the mythical image of meritocracy, individuals and organizations continue to espouse that individual career advancement is based on merit (Son Hing et al., 2002). Women of Color and Black women specifically have demonstrated academic achievement with increasing levels of graduate degrees greater than that of White women and White men yet remain underrepresented above middle-management (Catalyst, 2004, 2022; R. Thomas et al., 2020). Career advancement for Black women beyond middle management to the executive levels remains an unsolved issue.

Career advancement as a subset of career mobility includes lateral moves, demotions, and changing organizations. Vardi (1980) and Anderson et al. (1981) developed models to explain career advancement drivers and restrainers at the individual and organizational levels. The Vardi and Anderson et al. models addressed the decision process to identify who is likely to advance. Anderson et al. spoke to the changing nature of the economy and government regulations related to hiring practices, the changing demographics of the labor force, and external pressures on management to examine and potentially change their policies and procedures related to career advancement. Both models addressed environmental factors. In both models, advancement was the result of matching individual and organizational factors, assuming the environmental conditions were constant for all persons seeking advancement. Neither model addressed gender or race as a potential influence on the decision-making process for advancement. Until the 1980s, primarily White researchers studied career advancement for leadership, and they suggested their findings applied to all persons—by omitting any information to the contrary (Parker & Ogilvie, 1996; Vardi, 1980). A notable exception to the approach that

assumed all races, genders, and combinations of the two experienced career advancement the same was the model proposed by Dickens and Dickens (1982), a husband-and-wife team who published a four-phase gender-neutral development model based on their research on the experiences of Black male managers. The Dickens and Dickens model focused on the Black male manager experience during phases of the career advancement process versus the systemic drivers and restrainers. In the early 1980s, when all three models were published, Black women managers were exceedingly rare even at the entry level.

Black Women Leaders in the Literature

Black women leaders arrived in the workplace and in the literature in greater numbers in the 1980s (P. H. Collins, 1986; Crenshaw, 1989; Fulbright, 1985; Harvard, 1986; hooks, 1981; Nkomo, 1988; Nkomo & Cox, 1989; Parker & Ogilvie, 1996). Black women leaders were present in corporations in many sectors in lower-level management positions, even if sparingly in the 1980s (Dickens & Dickens, 1982; Sokoloff, 1988). The early literature explored the experience of being a Black person, a woman, in a leadership position, and made the case of the Black feminists that the experience of the Black woman was exceptionally different from that of the Black man or the White woman. Before 1980, colorblindness (Flores & Gunzenhauser, 2019), a belief that promoted ignoring racial differences in decision-making, denied differences due to racial group membership, overlooked physical differences related to race, and avoided discussing race in everyday interactions, was seen as the preferred approach to reduce racial discrimination. Its standard was to not address the existence of non-White persons in theories, as a participant attribute in studies, or as a factor in the discussion of findings, conclusions, or recommendations (Livingston et al., 2012). The early literature on women in the workplace

explored the expectations of women leaders and their experience without the consideration of

race (Hardesty & Jacobs, 1986; Sheehy, 1974). This changed in the 1990s.

In the 1990s, the literature on Black women leaders highlighted the unique experience

of Black women leaders. It introduced and described the experience of invisibility,

hypervisibility, and the isolation experienced by Black women leaders as they pursued

advancement in their leadership hierarchies (Blake-Beard, 1999; Coleman, 1998; S. M. Collins,

1997a, 1997b; Davidson, 1997; Parker & Ogilvie, 1996; R. Roosevelt Thomas, 1991). In the 21st

century, the literature maintained a focus on the unique experience of Black women and

increased the visibility on disappointing career advancement results for Black women leaders.

There was an increased focus on obstacles to advancement, the potential strategies for success,

and the uniqueness of the experience of being a Black person and female in raced and gendered

organizations in the 21st century (Allen & Lewis, 2016; Beckwith et al., 2016; Catalyst, 2004,

2022; P. H. Collins, 2019; P. H. Collins & Bilge, 2020; Davis, 2016; Davis & Maldonado, 2015;

Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Durr & Wingfield, 2011; Erskine et al., 2021; Gundemir et al., 2014;

Hite, 2004; Holder et al., 2015; Livingston et al., 2012; Parker, 2004; Pompper, 2011; Roberts et

al., 2019; Rosette & Livingston, 2012; J. W. Smith & Joseph, 2010; R. Thomas et al., 2020).

Beckwith et al. (2016) suggested that the primary cause of insufficient career

advancement for Black women was that workplace policies, norms, and practices were created

by and for men. They argued that it was not surprising that a work environment of this origin

would inherently create obstacles for Black women in leadership positions. Some literature

reported that the barriers Black women leaders encountered were distinctly different from the

glass ceiling type barriers widely discussed as impediments to the advancement of White women

(Catalyst, 2004, 2022; R. Thomas et al., 2020). The organization Lean In (2020) summarized the

situation in the corporate workplace that women leaders have it worse than men, women of color have a worse experience than White women, and that Black women have the worst experience of all. The obstacles faced by Black women became known as a Black ceiling, a concrete ceiling, or a concrete wall instead of the more familiar glass ceiling (Catalyst, 2004; Erskine et al., 2021; Holder et al., 2015), thus suggesting that the obstacles were more substantial than those faced by White women. Many wrote of the barriers to career advancement that Black women leaders encounter in the 21st century, fitting these into five major categories; lack of fit with the culture, lack of advocacy, discrimination, isolation, and (in)visibility (Beckwith et al., 2016; E. L. Bell & Nkomo, 2021; Catalyst, 2004; Durr & Wingfield, 2011; Erskine et al., 2021; Holder et al., 2015; Pompper, 2011; Sims & Carter, 2019; R. Thomas et al., 2020).

Barriers to Career Advancement for Black Women Leaders

Frequently reported barriers to career advancement for Black women leaders in primarily White corporations include stereotypes, invisibility, hypervisibility, the phenomena of the outsider within and double outsider status, the existence of raced or gendered organizations, and the experience of racism and sexism including microaggressions. Chester Middlebrook Pierce (1970), an African American psychiatrist and professor, first coined the term "microaggression". The term describes a form of modern racism, verbal or non-verbal, intentional, or non-intentional, conscious, or unconscious, direct, or indirect (Holder et al., 2015; Sue & Spanierman, 2020). It took several decades for the term to appear prominently in the literature.

The concept of microaggressions has some similarities with the phrase, everyday racism, that Essed (1991) defined as racism integrated into everyday situations. Microaggressions are a less blatant form of racism or sexism. Stereotypes have been used as a vehicle to weaponize racism and sexism. Stereotypes have been described as generalized beliefs about different social

groups that influence expectations of those in the group and the assessment of their attributes and contributions. Stereotypes of Black women have been found to be overwhelmingly negative, while those of White males overwhelmingly positive (Hankins, 2000; Rosette et al., 2016; Rosette et al., 2018; Reynolds-Dobbs et al., 2008). Sims and Carter (2019) described a concept related to stereotypes, *stereotype threat*. It is when a non-majority group member assessed their personal behavior to be at risk as conforming to a stereotype associated with their group social identity. It is something to be keenly avoided. For example, in a conflict situation a Black woman may become preoccupied with not appearing as an angry Black woman; she may alter her behavior in a way inappropriate for the situation to avoid seeming as an angry Black woman, such as smiling at a time when her face should convey anger, sadness, or disappointment.

Black women leaders reported feeling both invisible and hyper-visible in their career experiences. Invisibility has been described as being unheard, left out, not welcomed, and overlooked for engagement in formal and informal group settings, key roles, acknowledgement, advocation, and advancement (E. L. Bell & Nkomo, 2001; Catalyst, 2004; Davidson, 1997; McCluney & Rabelo, 2019; Purdie-Vaughns & Eibach, 2008). Hypervisibility is a common experience of Black women leaders (Buchanan & Settles, 2019; Ryland, 2013), a natural outcome of visually standing out from the dominant group, something they could not avoid and often resulting in added scrutiny, feeling at risk, and the need to be on guard to protect oneself. Black women reported feeling that they were being watched closely in the workplace (Lean In, 2020). The concept of an outsider-within has been widely discussed (E. L. Bell & Nkomo, 2001; P. H. Collins, 2000) and double outsider status (Bel1 & Nkomo, 2001; Catalyst, 2004; P. H. Collins, 1986; Rosette & Livingston, 2012). Double-outsider status was also referred to as double jeopardy (E. L. Bell & Nkomo, 2001; Rosette & Livingston, 2012) or the double

whammy (Nkomo & Cox, 1989). Both terms described the experience of not fitting in with both men and White people, hence the term "double" in both phrases.

Both terms describe the experience and outcome of simultaneously carrying the burdens of being Black and those of being a woman in spaces dominated by White people and males. The Black women have been outsiders with both White people and males. The concept of an "outsider within" (P. H. Collins, 1986) describes a Black women's experience of being seen as an outsider inside their primarily White organizations. A. N. Smith et al. (2019) strongly suggested that these outsiders were viewed as a threat to the members of the majority culture and seen as intriguing and an object of curiosity by those of a different race and, or gender. P. H. Collins (2000) argued that Black women leaders live in two worlds, that of their Black culture, and the White and male dominated workplace culture, but never feel at home in either (P. H. Collins, 2000). Black women leaders were sometimes viewed as outsiders in the Black community as well, creating a triple outsider status of sorts. Fortunately, these Black women trail blazers, and their leadership have been persistent and innovative, as they identified and implemented success strategies to begin to address the obstacle course of barriers they faced.

Career Advancement Strategies for Black Women Leaders

Two types of success strategies or helpful actions have been described as accelerating career advancement of Black women leaders in organizations. Strategies in this context are simply choices. One type of strategy is those to be employed by Black women leaders themselves; the other type of strategy is to be actioned by the organizational leadership. The most crucial action strategy by Black women leaders to accelerate career advancement is to routinely meet or exceed performance expectations. The other frequently reported successful strategies by Black women leaders has been to develop and demonstrate strong communication

skills, gain access to high-visibility assignments and projects, develop and maintain a strong support network, and attract and sustain influential advocacy (Beckwith et al., 2016; Catalyst, 2004; Erskine et al., 2021; Holder et al., 2015; McGlowan-Fellows & Thomas, 2004; Parker, 2002, 2004; R. Thomas et al., 2020).

The success strategies reported most frequently to be pursued by organization leadership to advance career progress for Black women leaders were to offer the Black women influential advocacy, visibility to high-level leaders and assignments, transparent feedback, access to career and leadership development programs, and the development of relationships characterized by mutual trust, respect, and transparency (E. L. Bell & Nkomo, 2001; Catalyst, 2004; Combs, 2003; Erskine et al., 2021; Hankins, 2000; Holder et al., 2015; McGlowan-Fellows & Thomas, 2004; Sims & Carter, 2019; R. Thomas et al., 2020). There was significant overlap between the success strategies proposed for action by the Black women and those proposed for action by their organizational leadership. The strategies of organizational leadership were not only beneficial for Black women; they appeared equally appropriate to support the advancement of all non-majority social groups in the workplace. Much of the literature that discussed success strategies for career advancement of Black women leaders argued that the improvement of career advancement results would require actions by both the Black women and their organizational leadership. Breaking down the concrete walls and ceilings constructed and maintained over time, would take collaboration, commitment, trust, resiliency, and risk taking by both the Black women and the leadership in their organizations.

Significance and Scope of the Study

Significance of the Study

The significance of this study is that it sought to understand the dynamics of a long-standing problem, insufficient career advancement of Black women to executive-level positions in large companies. It explored the most impactful events that helped or hindered the career advancement of Black women to the executive levels in large American companies. Humans have walked on the moon, but we cannot appoint more than four Black women to the CEO position in a Fortune 1000 corporation in the history of the United States. The study identified themes associated with the most impactful career advancement incidents, practical implications, and recommendations for Black women, their professional advocates, other leaders, and individuals that support diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts. The methodology selected provided an additional element of significance. Critical incident technique (CIT), to my knowledge, has not been used to research the specific career advancement experience of Black women leaders. Thus, this study provides a different lens from others to view and understand the experience and possibly create new learning and insights.

Scope of the Study

The study was inspired by the long-standing underrepresentation of Black women in executive levels in large, primarily White, American companies and my 35 plus years of leadership experience as a Black woman in one of these companies.

Delimitations are choices by the researcher to limit the scope of the study. There were several delimitations that framed the scope of this study. These include researcher positionality, the interpretation of the role of the researcher, participant criteria, methodology, and the research

questions that were essential to frame the boundaries of the study. These elements of the study are described in detail in Chapter III.

The focus of the study was the most impactful moments and events, or in the terminology of the CIT methodology, *incidents* in the career advancement experience of Black women leaders that achieved executive levels in large, primarily White American companies. Focusing on the most impactful incidents is integral to the choice of CIT methodology. The study purposefully included incidents that helped and hindered career advancement so as to view both sides of the issue. Much of the earlier literature focused on the complete career advancement experience or focused on the barriers and on success strategies for Black women leaders or their company leadership. My curiosity was focused on understanding the specific moments or events that the participants believed had the greatest impact on their career advancement journey.

The choice of participant selection criteria was important. The criteria were as follows: Black women who had achieved an executive level in Fortune 1000 companies with a minimum of 15 years of management experience; and having no active relationship with the researcher in the past 15 years. Large companies were defined by Fortune 1000 companies. Companies with primarily White leadership were chosen because the racial dynamics have an impact on the experience of all leaders, including Black women leaders. The boundary of a minimum of 15 years of management experience was used to ensure that the participants were experienced leaders with proven capability in leadership positions. Participants were responsible for deciding which events in their career were most impactful, This was instead of selecting items from a list prepared by persons who possibly had different perspectives than the participants so as to maximize the possibility of inclusion of the events assessed as most impactful from the participants' perspective. The decision to open the time frame to the entire career of the

participants was to allow flexibility for the participants to identify the most impactful events over their entire management career. The final criterion was that the participant could not have been involved in an active relationship with the researcher for the past 15 years. This was to minimize concerns participants might otherwise have had of sharing uncomfortable information in the context of a recent or current relationship.

<div align="center">**Study Design Elements**</div>

Researcher Positionality

I am a Black woman who worked in a Fortune 50 corporation for over 35 years. I worked in executive-level roles, including plant manager, director, and over 20 years in vice-presidential level positions. The executive roles I held were in the top 10% of the organization's hierarchy. Most of my executive-level assignments had responsibilities outside the United States. I lived as an expatriate for four years in Western Europe. I graduated from a small, primarily White, all-female elite high school. I earned an Ivy League undergraduate degree in engineering and a masters' degree in business management. I achieved candidacy in a doctoral program in leadership and change. This research study is a requirement for the doctoral program.

My experiences in academics, competitive tennis, and corporations provided frequent and intimate exposure to primarily White organizations and White male leadership. Early in my life I learned to navigate diverse cultures, Black, White, wealthy, poor, urban, and suburban in my academic and tennis endeavors. My experiences accelerated the development of code-switching competencies in verbal language, body language, decision-making, and other areas. Code-switching is the practice of alternating between different language styles or cultural norms based on the situation. My status as a Black woman with experience as an executive in a large, predominantly White organization made me an insider relative to the study participants.

My life experiences influenced my research focus, beliefs, assumptions, and interpretive framework that informed my research stance.

My worldview is constructivist-interpretivist. This means I believe there are multiple realities in social and organizational inquiry. Consistent with the definition of constructivist-interpretivist by Doldor et al. (2017), I believe that meaning making and interpretation occur in the context of the environment, experiences, cultural influences, and personal reflection.

Research Questions

The design of a research study begins with a problem and question. The problem at the core of this study is the underrepresentation of Black women in executive-level positions at large, primarily White corporate organizations. The overall question is why the underrepresentation persists. The more specific guiding question for this study was, what are the most impactful events that help or hinder the advancement of Black women to executive-level positions in predominantly White large companies in the United States? The specific research questions were as follows:

1. What were the most impactful career advancement incidents, which helped or hindered, that Black women executives experienced on their career advancement to executive level positions in large American corporations?

2. What themes and insights emerged across the incidents identified as most impactful, from the antecedents, the type of incidents, and the outcomes?

3. What practical implications and recommendations emerged from the study findings?

My intent was that the findings would be helpful to the participants, Black women leaders in general, academicians, researchers, leaders in corporations, and those interested in the

advancement of Black women leaders. I believe it is essential to better understand the experience of advancement and the forces that hinder and help career advancement to executive levels for Black women in large, primarily White corporations as a foundation for improving representation in the c-suite of these companies.

Methodological Approach

 This study was conducted as a qualitative study and using CIT (Flanagan, 1954). CIT is not as familiar as many other qualitative methodologies; however, it has grown in usage and has evolved since it was initially introduced in 1954 within a positivist worldview. It has been used by researchers with a more interpretive and constructivist world view for decades. CIT has been used to study leadership and change (Cope & Watts, 2000; Ellinger & Bostrom, 2002; Hutchins & Rainbolt, 2016), career advancement (Betsworth & Hansen, 1996; Blenkinsopp & Zdunczyk, 2005; Dix & Savickas, 1995), and issues related to race or gender (Kostamo et al., 2019; Luke & Sinclair, 1991; Wyatt & Silvester, 2015).

The methodology, as its name suggests, focused on incidents considered critical. A critical incident is a significant event that that helps or hinders the targeted activity or process. A critical incident contains three parts: the antecedent or what led to the incident, the incident that helped or hindered an activity or process, and the outcome(s) or the result(s) of the incident. CIT methodology has five steps:

1. Definition of purpose

2. Specification of the plan, definitions, and scope

3. Collection of data

4. Analysis of data

5. Interpretation and reporting of data.

A more detailed review of the methodology, the rationale for its use in this study, the ethical considerations, and the approach to ensure trustworthiness is discussed in Chapter III. There were several advantages to using CIT in this research study. The CIT is flexible and has been proven to be effective for investigating real situations and provide insights into what was effective or not in a known context (Kandola, 2012). Viergever (2019) reported that CIT was best suited for research questions that seek to answer what helps or hinders some experience or activity. This question was central in this study: what helped or hindered the career advancement of the Black women executives?

Another reason CIT was a good fit for this study was that CIT allowed the participants to decide which incidents were most critical to them and identify the context based on their perspective (Edvardsson & Roos, 2001). Participants use their language and jargon to describe their experience and context. CIT is well suited for effectively giving voice to silenced or marginalized voices because they—not the researcher or others who may view the context or incident from a privileged, different, or unknowing perspective—determine what is most critical, (Gremler, 2004).

Participant Criteria, Recruitment Strategy, and Prework

The study used a purposive sampling strategy. Purposive samples require the researcher to use their judgment to choose the participant criteria that would best enable the research objectives and questions (Saunders, 2012). The participant criteria for this study were Black women who achieved executive roles in Fortune 1000 corporations, with 15 or more years of management work experience in the United States. Any potential participant that had an active relationship with the researcher in past 15 years was rejected. They are leaders who have

achieved executive levels in a Fortune 1000 company because of the significant dearth of representation of Black women at executive levels (Catalyst, 2022; R. Thomas et al., 2020).

The Antioch University Internal Review Board (IRB) application was approved before recruitment to confirm that the design was ethically sound and minimized risk to the researcher, the participants, and the University. Participants were recruited through social media, Black professional groups, professional management associations, and referrals from my known contacts. Participants were required to complete an informed consent form and a demographic questionnaire prior to the interview. The demographic questionnaire confirmed the participant criteria while providing additional demographic information. Participants were strongly encouraged to complete a reflective prework exercise to help the participants identify their most impactful career advancement critical incidents prior to the interview. The design included ethical design standards end-to-end and is reviewed in detail in Chapter III.

Data Collection, Analysis, and Reporting

The critical incident data was collected in a semi-structured interview and recorded on the Zoom platform. The participants provided consent for the audio and the video recording of the interview. An interview guide was used to standardize the interview process and facilitate brief notetaking during the interview. A written transcript was produced from the zoom audio file with the Ottter.ai transcription software. Each participant was offered the opportunity to review the transcript for accuracy and privacy concerns following edits for privacy and confidentiality. The participant review of the transcript for accuracy is known as member checking (Birt et al., 2016) and contributes to the trustworthiness of the findings. The unit of analysis in CIT is incidents, not interviews. The criteria for the minimum number of incidents required is thematic saturation; this is when new themes cease to emerge.

CIT is an inductive methodology, meaning it seeks to identify patterns versus test a predetermined hypothesis. A thematic coding analysis process was used to develop categories and themes from the data collected. Antecedents, the incident itself, and outcomes were coded for each incident. A coding partner was used along with a faculty methodologist. The coding partner helped to establish consistency in coding, which contributed to the trustworthiness of the findings. The faculty methodologist provided expertise on the methodology. The software coding program, Dedoose, was used to facilitate analysis of the data. The findings are reported and discussed in Chapter IV. In Chapter V, data was interpreted, key insights were identified, practical implications, recommendations, and opportunities for additional research were summarized.

Organization of the Dissertation

This dissertation is organized into five chapters. Chapter I, this chapter, presented an overview for the study providing background and context, a synthesis of the relevant literature, the significance and scope of the study, and the key elements of the study design. Chapter II is a review of relevant literature. The review covers a theoretical and conceptual orientation, the process of career advancement, Black women leaders in the literature, career advancement barriers Black women leaders encounter, and success strategies for Black women leader career advancement. The focus of Chapter III is the methodology. The chosen methodology, CIT, is introduced providing a rationale for it use, and a historical review of its use in related research. Researcher positionality, context, and the research questions are also further discussed. The study design is reviewed in detail including the scope of the study, the participant criteria and recruitment strategy, and an explanation of the process of data collection, data analysis, ensuring trustworthiness, and the ethical considerations.

Chapter IV provides a brief update on learnings and insights related to data collection and analysis and a review of the research findings and results. The themes that emerged from the data are discussed in detail with examples provided from the participant interviews to illuminate the themes. Chapter V is a discussion of the findings that highlights important insights from the overall data themes. Evidence is provided from the participant interviews, and linkages to the literature are provided to emphasize the important insights.

CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

Chapter II is a review of the literature relevant to the career advancement of Black women leaders in organizations. While all study participants achieved executive-level roles in Fortune 1000 companies, the critical incidents studied here are from their entire leadership career. This chapter reviews the scholarly peer-reviewed literature, relevant theoretical and conceptual frameworks, topics critical to understanding career advancement, and Black women leaders in organizations. The scope of the literature review was broad in time and sources.

Terms Used in Literature Review

Some words were used interchangeably in the review of literature and in this dissertation. The term "African American" was used interchangeably with the word Black to identify ethnic group status. "Woman" was used interchangeably with the term "female." The words "company" and "corporation" were used interchangeably. The term organization was used to describe a company, a corporation, a division, or a department, or an organized group of people with a shared purpose. Organizations varied in size. The words "job," "position," "assignment," and "role" were used interchangeably. The term "leader" was used interchangeably with manager. The term executive was used to describe managers or leaders above middle management, normally in the top 10 to 15% of the corporate hierarchy by level.

Theoretical and Conceptual Orientation

Conceptual theories provide a framework for designing and understanding research. Individual theories function as the structural elements of the framework, connecting to create a space in which the research exists and facilitates the understanding of the literature, the data, and the findings. Lynham (2002) suggested that applying theory to a problem connects theory to the world of practice. She proposed that the inability to apply traditional leadership theories to Black

women leaders in majority White leadership organizations implied a need to re-evaluate conventional theories as no longer valid to determine if they should be adapted, discontinued, or substituted. Leadership theories have advanced to be more inclusive of women.

Leadership theories have evolved from the great man theory (Carlyle, 1841) to concepts that support the democratization and feminization of leadership (Booysen, 2020). Eighty years ago, during World War II (1939–1945), women in the United States began to expand their participation in the workforce. Women initially started working in non-professional roles to support the needs related to the war as many men were away in the service of the country. White women replaced White men in non-professional jobs. Black women backfilled White women's jobs in non-professional roles or took on domestic roles to support White women working outside the home.

Twenty years later, the Civil Rights Movement produced the Civil Rights Act (1964), which banned employment inequity based on race, gender, religion, or national origin. Theoretically, this opened more employment opportunities to all women as well as Black people. White women advanced in more areas of employment at a faster rate than Black women, yet the professional ranks remained dominated by White men at all levels (Dickens & Dickens, 1982).

The theories identified as most relevant to frame this study focused on the career advancement of Black women were expectation states theory (Berger & Fisek, 1974), leadership categorization theory (Lord et al., 1982), critical race theory (Bell, 1973, Crenshaw, 1989), the theory of gendered and raced organizations (J. Acker, 1990), Black feminist thought (P. H. Collins, 2000; hooks, 1981), intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989, 1990), and critical Whiteness theory (Garner, 2007; McIntosh, 1998). Theories are essential to facilitate understanding of leadership experiences related to the emergence and development of Black Women leaders in

organizations (Byrd, 2009). Other literature essential to understanding the study and its findings address the decision-making process for career advancement, the evolution of the experience of Black women in leadership roles in organizations, the barriers to career advancement experienced by Black women in leadership, and the proven success strategies for career advancement of Black women in leadership. The focus of the remainder of this chapter is the review of the relevant literature beginning with the theoretical concepts and frameworks.

Expectation States Theory

The expectations of others are critical to both the leadership categorization theory and the expectation states theory. Expectation states theory is more general in its application. It asserts that society has expectations of individuals with specific societal status attributes, including gender, race, type of role in an organization, and other societal attributes (Berger & Fisek, 1974). This theory addresses why some group members acquire and maintain privileges that are not available to others in the group. It asserts that receiving privileges is not related to proven experience or competency but some "other" factor. That other factor is the macro belief about a particular social group that affects engagement and evaluation at an individual level (Correll & Ridgeway, 2006). According to expectation states theory, socially significant characteristics like race and gender account for some of the differences in the treatment and evaluation of people despite other factors such as acquired and demonstrated experience, skills, and competencies.

Proponents of expectation states theory maintain that socially significant characteristics like race and gender account for some of the differences in the treatment and evaluation of people despite other factors such as acquired and demonstrated experience, skills, and competencies. Stereotypes of Black women are overwhelmingly negative, while those of White males are overwhelmingly positive (Rosette et al., 2016; Rosette et al., 2018; Reynolds-Dobbs et

al., 2008). Carton and Rosette (2011) reported that stereotypes influence the assessment of White leaders differently than Black leaders; the influence on White leaders is less as Whites are the normative group, leaders are expected to be White. The expectations and implicit beliefs associated with attributes of individuals play a role in historical stereotypes of Black women as overbearing, incompetent, unprofessional, and angry and do not align with the attributes associated with successful leaders or executives (Allen & Lewis, 2016; Rosette et al., 2016; Rosette et al., 2018). There is ample evidence of the use of stereotypes to identify Black women leaders as outsiders to threaten mainstream White thought and practices in organizations, act as a barrier to the effectiveness of Black women in the workplace, and ultimately their career advancement (Carton & Rosette, 2011; P. H. Collins, 2000; Parker & Ogilvie, 1996; Rosette et al., 2016; Rosette et al., 2018). Expectation states theory and leadership categorization theory are both consciously and unconsciously influenced by stereotypes (Lowe, 2013; Rosette et al., 2008; Tate & Page, 2018).

Leadership Categorization Theory

Leadership categorization theory and expectation states theory overlap in the assumption that individuals are granted or denied privileges based on factors different from merit. Leadership categorization theory asserts that a key factor that enables or restricts privilege is an individual's perceived fit with the assessor's implicit beliefs of the characteristics of effective leaders (Lord et al., 1982). Gundemir et al. (2014) emphasized that race and gender have often been characteristics that influence enabling or restricting privilege. The long history of White male leadership can consciously or unconsciously influence the assessor's beliefs of what successful leaders and leadership look like. Higher levels of leadership in large organizations in the United States remain disproportionately White, and male and non-White persons are

consistently expected to assume roles as followers versus leaders (Catalyst, 2022; Gundemir et al., 2014; Lowe, 2013; Rosette et al., 2008).

Critical Whiteness Theory

Critical Whiteness theory (Garner, 2007; McIntosh, 1989) is the belief that White privilege is accepted as normal and sets the standard. It proposes that White people do not recognize the benefits of being White including their unearned privilege. Critical Whiteness theory deconstructed how White people accumulate racial privilege and acknowledge the consequences of Whiteness. The literature asserted that Whiteness is a critical element of organizational culture and the power structure (Grimes, 2002; Liu, 2021). Organizational studies about Whiteness were scant before the 1990s despite the domination of organizations by White leaders—and the dominance of White participants in organizational studies.

White people continue to dominate leadership positions across all sectors in the United States while the demographics have increasingly become less White (DiAngelo, 2018). These demographic changes in an environment of increased social justice issue awareness have contributed to the business case to understand Whiteness. An exponential increase in diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives across all sectors has also increased interest to understand Whiteness better so that the planned interventions will be effective. Recently, there has been increased awareness, understanding, and discussion of Whiteness as a phenomenon (Grimes, 2002; Liu, 2021; McIntosh, 1998). Levine-Rasky (2016) described Whiteness as follows:

> Whiteness is not one thing, nor is it static. As a practice of power, it is both decisive and contingent, standard, and irreconcilable. It shape-shifts in different circumstances. More than an identity that is visible or invisible, normalized, or different, distant, or proximate, it works like a resource upon which members may draw to negotiate their inclusion. (p. 57)

There are other concepts instrumental in understanding Whiteness and its implications. DiAngelo (2018) identified the need to detangle prejudice, discrimination, and racism as

essential to the discussion of Whiteness. Prejudice is prejudging based on social group status or characteristics. DiAngelo claimed that denial of prejudice confirms an extreme lack of self-awareness. Discrimination is an action taken based on prejudice, the transfer of thought into action. Liu (2021) compared racial oppression to violence to facilitate understanding structural racism. Liu claimed that racial and gender discrimination was an assault to identity and dignity that manifests as shame, guilt, anxiety, and anger in the discriminated person. Racism was described as a system of oppression, created, and sustained based on prejudice and enforced by authority and control (DiAngelo, 2018). Increased awareness and understanding of concepts and issues related to Whiteness has resurrected interest and debate over critical race theory in education, politics, and the media.

Grimes (2002) explored three concepts related to Whiteness: interrogating, re-centering, and masking. Interrogating Whiteness raises awareness. Masking of Whiteness is the process that protects the invisibility of Whiteness, the denial of difference, and the assumption that non-White is inferior. Unmasking Whiteness means examining the assumptions, operation, and implications. Re-centering Whiteness means addressing the implicit assumption that White people, their characteristics, and ways of being and doing are implicitly the standards for normal and assumed to be better. The concept of normalization refers to how Whiteness discreetly becomes the standard by which differences are assessed (Levine-Rasky, 2016; Liu, 2021).

White solipsism is another related concept. It is White people believing their way is the best or only way something can be done or that only White people matter or exist (Levine-Rasky, 2016; Liu, 2021). Racialization is the process of assigning a racial identity to a process, object, condition, or group.

It has been argued that White people have the luxury of seeing themselves as individuals instead of being judged by group membership (Grimes, 2002). Grimes (2002) concluded that Whiteness is an issue of power in organizations. Liu (2021) asserted that White people and males find it difficult to see—and painful to accept—privileges granted prenatally and that benefit them for life. The lack of comfort and denial White people experience because of these privileges have been identified as contributors to unconscious bias in the workplace. The inability of some White people to see and acknowledge the elements of privilege inherent in many of the policies, practices, and systems in the workplace. are obstacles to career advancement for Black leaders (Grimes, 2002; Levine-Rasky, 2016; Liu, 2021).

Theory of Gendered and Raced Organizations

Executive leadership in most organizations is dominated by persons who are White and male (DiAngelo, 2018; Gundemir et al., 2014). Gundemir et al. (2014) found evidence of implicit pro-White bias that helped to explain the under-representation of ethnic minorities in leadership positions. Beckwith et al. (2016) claimed the root cause of the underrepresentation of Black women leaders in organizations was White men creating workplace policies, norms, and practices for men and based on men's experiences. This can be said more directly: White men created the workplace *for* White men. Historically, most leadership literature assumed that organizations were gender and race-neutral, meaning that organizational practices did not carry bias associated with gender or race and provided no advantage to a particular gender or race. It presumed that women and Black people would advance in their careers the same as White men when and only when they acquired and demonstrated leadership competency like their White male counterparts. But it has been recognized for over 30 years that many organizations are not gender or race-neutral, and that most have inequality regimes (J. Acker, 1990; Diehl &

Dzubinski, 2016; Mills, 2002; Lowe, 2013; Parker, 2002; Parker & Ogilvie, 1996). An inequality regime is a loosely interrelated group of practices, processes, behaviors, and meanings that maintain gender and racial inequities within organizations. J. Acker (1990) concluded that power relations in raced or gendered organizations were influenced by often hidden assumptions about race or gender embedded in the organizational culture. There is a tendency by the White majority group to be blind to the facts and avoid the discussion of the reasons for these equities. The assumption that organizations are gendered or raced is essential to understanding the barriers and success strategies for the career advancement of Black women in organizations.

Critical Race Theory

Critical race theory (CRT) examines the role of race and racism in society. CRT problematized Whiteness as the norm and made the power dynamics of race explicit. It acknowledged that the legacy of slavery, segregation, and the imposition of second-class citizenship on Black Americans and other people of color continues to permeate the social fabric of the United States. People of African heritage in the United States have had vastly different experiences than Whites linked to their social and historical context (Catalyst, 2004). Slavery, racial segregation, and discrimination based on skin color contributed to the uniqueness of the experience. The literature on CRT is diverse and covered assumptions on how race affects people within the legal system. Matsuda (1995) collaborated with Charles Lawrence and Kimberlé Crenshaw, two high-profile scholars on the topic, and identified six basic assumptions of CRT:

- Racism is endemic to American life.

- The existing legal system and scholarship are not color-blind.

- The law must be understood historically and contextually.

- The subjective experiences of women and people of color render them well suited to analyze race relations and discrimination law.

- CRT scholarship borrows from diverse intellectual traditions.

- CRT works toward the elimination of all types of oppression.

CRT addresses how White people accumulate racial privilege and acknowledge the consequences of Whiteness. Critical whiteness theory and CRT are both helpful to understand the experience of Black women leaders in White-led organizations. However, CRT did not originally address the unique experience and challenges of Black women: Black feminist theory filled that gap.

Black Feminist Theory

Black feminism is grounded in elements of critical race theory (D. A. Bell, 1973; Crenshaw, 1989). The founders of Black feminist theory recognized the women's movement and the civil rights movement in the United States provided insufficient focus to the unique predicament of Black women (P. H. Collins, 1996; hooks, 1984). Black feminist theory sought to fill gaps in critical race theory and feminist theories from the perspective of Black women. Black feminist theory (P. H. Collins, 1996; Crenshaw, 1989; hooks, 1981) has its roots in slavery in the United States as Black women slaves sought to make sense of the marginalization they experienced because of their class, race, and gender combination (P. H. Collins, 1996; hooks, 1984). Sojourner Truth's (1851/2020) famous speech, "Ain't I a Woman" at the 1851 Women's Conference in Akron, Ohio, publicly called attention to the women's movement in the United States and that it was not inclusive of Black women (Rosser-Mims, 2010). In 1892, Anna Julia Cooper, a Black American female from the Southern United States, published a book titled, *A Voice from the South by a Black Woman of the South* (Cooper, 1892/2017). Cooper was said to

be one of the first Black feminists who spoke of the possibilities for Black women if all things were equal (Rosser-Mims, 2010).

The voices of Cooper and Truth emerged from slavery as products of slaves observing and experiencing sexist oppression, the racism that was a foundation of slavery, and the loss of control of their reproductive rights. It was commonplace for Black women to be victims of rape during slavery. Rosser-Mims (2010) suggested the discriminatory experiences during slavery contributed to the emergence of Black feminism. The Black feminist theory framework became more defined and visible in the 1970s in reaction to the feminist movement, which focused on the lived experience of white middle-class women exclusively. Black feminist theory is a product of legal scholarship seeking to make sense of persistent and systemic racism following the enactment of civil rights laws and feminist theories that sought to understand gender inequality and promote women's rights and interests exclusively for middle-class White women (Allen & Lewis, 2016).

Collins's (2000) description of Black feminism declared the experience of White women as different from that of African American women due to the differences in their experiences of power, growth, and development. The collision of gender, race, and class created a unique experience for African American women in primarily White organizations in the United States (Davis & Maldonado, 2015; hooks, 1984; Stanley, 2009).

There were six beliefs that formed the foundation of Black Feminism:

- Black women experience the world differently from others.
- Black women face similar challenges yet experience them differently and assign significance to the experiences differently.

- Black women have generated alternative practices and knowledge to survive and thrive.

- Black women intellectuals are essential to Black Feminism as they are more likely to have significant insights than those that experience the world differently

- Black Feminism must be dynamic to adjust to changing oppressions and conditions.

- Black Feminism is concerned with the broader struggle for human dignity, empowerment, and social justice.

Black feminist theory is a lens to facilitate meaning-making of the experience of being Black and a woman simultaneously, addressing the oppressions associated with both. Black feminist theory called attention to the intersecting dimensions of race and gender in the lives of Black women which later evolved into the concept of intersectionality (P. H. Collins, 1996; Crenshaw, 1989).

Intersectionality

Intersectionality is the study of the meaning and implication of simultaneous membership in multiple social groups (P. H. Collins, 2019; Crenshaw, 1989; Davis & Maldonado, 2015). Intersectionality as a concept emerged alongside Black feminism in exploring the multiple oppressions of gender, race, and class of Black women (P. H. Collins, 2019; Rosette et al., 2018). Intersectionality implies a Du Bois-like double consciousness (Du Bois, 1903). Du Bois described double consciousness as the ability to operate successfully in the dominant White culture and in the Black culture. In today's terms, it implies the ability to code-switch. Intersectionality added gender to the Du Bois double consciousness model, creating a requirement of triple consciousness for Black women to join, survive, and thrive in primarily

White male environments. To thrive, Black women must be able to successfully negotiate, White, Black, and male environments.

The concept of intersectionality has been widely used in the early 21st century by scholars, policy advocates, practitioners, and activists as an analytical tool to understand and solve problems related to multiple social group membership (P. H. Collins & Bilge, 2020). P. H. Collins (2019) proposed four guiding premises for intersectionality as a social theory:

1. Race, class, and gender are interdependent power enabling and disabling systems.

2. Intersectionality produces complex social inequalities.

3. Intersectionality shapes individual and group experiences, and as a result,

4. Solving social problems require an intersectional analysis.

Black women dominate the literature on intersectionality. Historically literature on leadership defined all leadership as White and male, all women as White, and all Black people as male (Hull et al., 1982). The existence of women who were also Black was missing in that historical view of leaders. A distinct perspective was needed to understand the experience of Black women in leadership. More recent leadership literature has characterized this flaw as the assumption that the experience of Black women is the additive sum of being Black and being a woman. Instead, the experience is a multiplier of the unique oppressions of being a woman and being a Black person (P. H. Collins, 2000).

The Process of Career Advancement

Career advancement in this study is defined as a change in work assignment within a corporate entity that results in moving to a higher status and, or organizational level. Career advancement is a subset of career mobility which includes not only promotions, but also lateral moves and demotions within and between corporations (Duncan, 2018). The decision on who

advances and who does not is important on both an individual and organizational level. The decision on who advances affects employee morale, compensation, behavior, and organization results. Prior to the 21st century, career advancement in leadership positions was studied by White researchers who inferred their findings applied to persons of all races and genders (Parker & Ogilvie, 1996; Vardi, 1980).

The concept of meritocracy is mentioned often in the literature on career advancement. Meritocracy describes the ideal social system to regulate career advancement based on merit, including skills, experiences, and demonstrated results. While meritocracy was touted as the primary driver for career advancement, critics confirm this as a myth, an ideal, but not a reality (Hathaway, 1984; Leighton, 2020; Rhode, 1996). Variables other than merit influence career advancement, such as the quality of relationships with those in power and the resemblance of individual characteristics of those seeking advancement to those historically associated with leaders such as a more masculine leadership style, gender, race, and appearance.

In the 1980s, two integrative models for career mobility within organizations were posited. Anderson et al. (1981) and Vardi (1980) affirmed the importance of career advancement to individuals and their organizations, stating promotions, demotions, and transfers in organization were recognized as rewards and punishment. Anderson et al. acknowledged the impact of the changing nature of the economy, government regulation of hiring practices, demographics of the labor force, and the impact of external pressures on management to examine and potentially change policies and procedures for career advancement decisions. Both models included driving or constraining factors at the individual and organizational levels and two types of individual factors: psychological (i.e., occupational choice, aspirations, anchors, satisfaction, and career decisions) and sociological (i.e., career patterns, life stages, status passage, individual

characteristics, and career behavior). The models suggested that there were also two types of organizational factors: administrative (i.e., contribution, career contingencies, opportunities, commitment by organization, and socialization) and economic (i.e., internal labor market, vacancy chains, organizational constraints, career management, and mobility patterns).

Models from Anderson et al. (1981) and Vardi (1980) accounted for environmental factors internal and external to the organization. Neither model specifically discussed the possible implications of gender, race, or class in mobility beyond that they were characteristics of the individuals. Anderson et al. stated that an individual's opportunity and experience of mobility was primarily dependent on matching their individual characteristics and the organizational criteria for advancement.

As White women and Black men in the United States entered management roles in more significant numbers in the 1970s, following the Civil Rights Act of 1964, some scholars focused on female and Black leader career advancement (Dickens & Dickens, 1982; Hardesty & Jacobs, 1986; Kanter, 1977; Molly, 1975; Rose & Larwood, 1988). Internal and external pressures continued to motivate firms in the United States to increase the number of women and Black people in leadership roles. The barriers that limited the career advancement of women and Black leaders were well documented, yet the mechanism that allowed these barriers to remain in place was understudied (Beckwith et al., 2016). Dickens and Dickens (1982) published a four-phase gender-neutral development model based on their research on the experiences of Black managers in corporations. Their model differed from the models of Anderson et al. (1981) and Vardi (1980) in that it was from the perspective of a Black leader's experience during the career advancement process instead of the factors that influenced career advancement. The model posited four phases:

1. *Entry phase* characterized by insufficient direction and a false sense of security.

2. *Adjustment phase* with two stages, dissatisfaction, and frustration when the managers tested the organization by pushing back.

3. *Planned growth phase* characterized by management of the Black leaders' rage, adaptation of leadership style, the establishment of goals and then revisiting phase two experiencing more dissatisfaction and frustration.

4. *Success phase* characterized by gaining confidence, reaching milestone goals, and planning for the future. The authors identified strategies to overcome the barriers in the White corporate world and to effectively progress through the phases in the model.

The research project by Dickens and Dickens (1982) that led to the model was an exploratory, descriptive study with 15 Black males. The authors used non-gender-specific pronouns throughout the book, leaving it unclear if the development model and the strategies were specific to Black men only or included Black women. It should be noted that in the 1980s, Black women leaders were scarce in corporations. Research by E. L. Bell and Nkomo (2001) found that Black professional women had to come to terms with knowing there was no direct relationship between their professional ability and their upward mobility. That same study reported that Black women leaders' knowing that there was no direct relationship between their ability and their mobility did not cause them to give up on career progression or accept lack of career progression as a permanent status. The remainder of this literature review will survey scholarship specifically about Black women leaders, with a focus on the obstacles and success strategies for career advancement.

Black Women Leaders in the Literature

The Invisibility of Black Women in the Literature Prior to 1980

Following the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Black people were admitted to colleges and universities in unprecedented numbers, received degrees upon completion, and pursued management employment opportunities. White companies, under the threat of federal sanctions, increased hiring Black people in the 1960s and 1970s, with Black men disproportionately landing management roles compared to Black women (P. H. Collins, 2000). Black women were invisible in leadership literature in the 1970s despite a substantial increase in literature focused on women. The literature focused on professional women rarely if ever mentioned Black women. In her book *Passages*, Sheehy (1974) reported that men and women had different experiences of similar life stages and the predictable crisis in an adult life. But Sheehy did not address the possible differences in the experience of non-White people. Schaef (1985) focused on the experience of women in a male society and called her book a gift to women. She stated in the preface to the first edition, "Simply because it exists, it validates and confirms femaleness in this culture. It expresses a reality of which many women know but are not always aware—that of being in a culture but not of it" (p. ii). Black women historically and at that time were painfully aware they were not of the White male society culture. Hardesty and Jacobs (1986) addressed success and betrayal as experienced by women in the corporate workplace. They reported that women occupied 30% of the corporate managerial roles but felt betrayed because they were stuck in positions in the lower levels of leadership. Throughout Sheehy's book, references to non-White women were sparse or absent, and the content blatantly did not address their experience. It addressed myths about women in corporations; conspicuously absent was the myth that all corporate women are White.

Nkomo (1992) discussed the exclusion of Black women in leadership literature and observed that race was not considered a relevant variable except in studies about race. Essed (1991) argued that race is an organizing element in social organizations resulting in many fundamental social relations becoming racialized. Scholars called attention to the exclusion of Black women in leadership research despite their increased representation in middle management in the 1990s (Nkomo, 1992; Parker & Ogilvie, 1996). Early research on the impact of differences experienced by women leaders did not address racial differences (Nkomo & Cox, 1990). The exclusion of Black women in the literature may have resulted from the small population in the workplace; however, the authors did not acknowledge the low representation nor the reason why. The reader was left unclear if the literature was relevant to all women.

The Emergence of Black Women Leaders in the Literature: 1980–2000

In the 1980s, Black women leaders arrived in the workplace and the literature in greater numbers (Collins, 1986; Crenshaw, 1989; Fulbright, 1985; Harvard, 1986; hooks, 1981; Nkomo, 1988; Nkomo & Cox, 1990). Previous leadership theories were historically based on White men and presumed to apply to all genders, races, and combinations of the two (Sims & Carter, 2019). The early literature repeatedly illustrated what Black feminists had been saying: that the experiences of Black women in leadership were unique and distinct from those of Black men or White women.

As Black women slowly advanced in organizational leadership hierarchies in the 1990s, more literature highlighted their experience of invisibility, hypervisibility, and isolation (Blake-Beard, 1999; Coleman, 1998; S. M. Collins, 1997a, 1997b; Davidson, 1997; Parker & Ogilvie, 1996; R. Roosevelt Thomas, 1991). Research on Black women leaders in the 1980s and 1990s was disproportionately about experiences in academia where the Black women leader

representation was more significant than in corporations (deVries, 2011; Evans, 1971; Fischer, 1974; Mosley, 1980; Tucker, 1980). During these two decades, more Black women were hired into entry level management roles and as had been the experience of Black men, they were placed in marginalized assignments in the organizations. These marginalized assignments were mainly focused on the Black community or Black issues and not on mainstream positions that wielded influence or power (S. M. Collins, 1989; Fulbright, 1985).

Rose and Larwood (1988) addressed the pathways and pitfalls of women's careers. The overview of their book, *Women's Careers: Pathways and Pitfalls*, highlighted the dearth of literature on the unique obstacles Black women leaders experienced related to race and gender discrimination. The authors spoke to the experiences of Black women managers, their challenges, and career success strategies. They challenged the widely held assumption that the experience of being Black and a woman in a workplace dominated by White men could be extrapolated from the experience of White women and Black men and called for a model to recognize the complex interrelationship between the race and gender. Rose and Larwood acknowledged the difficulty of obtaining an adequate sample size of Black women leaders in organizations for their study. They did, however, include a chapter by Nkomo (1988) that addressed the experience of the forgotten Black woman leader.

Nkomo and Cox (1990) conducted a research study on the upward mobility of Black managers in private sector organizations. The study examined the mobility of Black men versus that of Black women. It included six individual determinants of mobility: job performance, company seniority, line management assignments, job involvement/commitment, mentor assistance, and interracial social interaction based on previous literature. Also included were four organizational determinants: size of the organization, frequency of vacancies, the approach to

affirmative action/equal employment programs and, the percentage of minorities in the workplace. The study showed that upward mobility rates were not significantly different between Black men and Black women. It found that individual determinants were more important than organizational determinants for both Black men and Black women. Another important finding from this research was that the predictors of upward mobility differed for Black men and Black women. For Black men, line assignments and seniority were strong predictors, whereas for the Black women, influential mentors and organization size were strong predictors. The study cautioned that despite the individual determinants for upward mobility being the same for Black managers and White managers, access to the determinants was often not equal. This included access to line roles, visibility to top leaders, and access to influential mentor relationships.

Coleman (1998) researched barriers to career advancement for Black and White women in leadership. The study reported that the Black women identified racial discrimination as their most significant barrier to upward progression. In contrast, White women identified exclusion from the 'ole boy's' network as their most significant barrier to advance in the management structure. Coleman found that obstacles to advancement were often ingrained in the organization's culture, in the structure and daily practices. This observation was consistent with Essed (1991) who argued that race was an organizing principle in organizations that manifested as repeated and reinforced behaviors in everyday situations that resulted in the experience of oppression based on race. Essed's findings were consistent with the literature on raced and gendered organizations (DiAngelo, 2018; Gundemir et al., 2014) and the phenomena termed microaggressions.

Black Women Leaders in the Literature in the 21st Century

In the 21st century, there was further exploration of connections to theories on race and gender such as CRT (D. A. Bell, 1973), Black feminist theory (P. H. Collins, 2000; hooks, 1981), and other key concepts associated with the experience of Black women leaders. A substantial literature addressed the comparison to the White female leadership experience, the role of stereotyping, intersectionality, the outsider phenomena, hypervisibility, and invisibility (E. L. Bell & Nkomo, 2001; Catalyst, 2004; P. H. Collins, 2000; Combs, 2003: Hankins, 2000; Hite, 2004; Parker, 2002, 2004; Purdie-Vaughns & Eibach, 2008; Reynolds-Dobbs et al., 2008; Rosette et al., 2008).

A seminal work on Black and White women in leadership was published in 2001 (E. L. Bell & Nkomo, 2001): *Our Separate Ways: Black and White Women and the Struggle for Professional Identity*. It was based on a study of Black and White professional women who came of age in the 1960s. E. L. Bell and Nkomo (2001) interviewed 80 Black women, 40 White women, and surveyed 825 Black and White women combined. They explored the differences in the experience of White professional women versus Black professional women at a time when this was an understudied phenomenon (E. L. Bell & Nkomo, 2001). E. L. Bell and Nkomo addressed what they termed flashpoints, described as watershed moments that led to opportunities, frustration, and struggle. Flashpoints were organized into six phases: breaking in, fitting in, barriers to advancement, climbing barriers, making change, and recognizing that work is not everything. The Fortune 1000 companies did not appoint a Black woman CEO for another eight years.

In 2009, Ursula Burns was appointed the first Black woman CEO of a Fortune 500 corporation, Xerox Corporation. The expectation was that this was the breaking of the dam, and

that more CEO appointments would follow sooner than later for Black women; it was later. Seven years later, in 2016, Lisa Wardell was appointed CEO of a Fortune 1000 company, Adtalem Global Education. Five years later, in 2021, two Black women were appointed to CEO positions in Fortune 500 corporations, Roz Brewer became CEO of the Walgreens-Boots Alliance, and Thasunda Brown Duckette was appointed CEO of the TIAA corporation.

The literature on Black women in leadership between 2010 and 2015 focused on the dismal representation at the executive levels, the career advancement barriers and success strategies, the uniqueness of the experience, and implications of being Black and a woman in primarily White and male organizations (Davis & Maldonado, 2015; Durr & Wingfield, 2011; Holder et al., 2015; Livingston et al., 2012; Pompper, 2011; Rosette & Livingston, 2012; J. W. Smith & Joseph, 2010). After 2015, the literature began to focus on the lack of career advancement, barriers to career advancement, implications of the lack of progress, the systemic nature of many of the barriers, and the success strategies for career advancement (Allen & Lewis, 2016; Beckwith et al., 2016; Catalyst, 2022; P. H. Collins, 2019; P. H. Collins & Bilge, 2020; Davis, 2016; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Erskine et al., 2021; Gundemir et al., 2014; McCluney & Rabelo, 2019; Roberts et al., 2019; Rosette et al., 2016; Sims & Carter, 2019; A. N. Smith et al., 2019).

E. L. Bell and Nkomo's (2001) seminal work was republished 20 years later with an updated preface and epilogue (E. L. Bell & Nkomo, 2021). The authors reported that corporate executives in 2021 were more aware of the need to attract, hire, and advance women of color. They acknowledged the new and growing focus on diversity, equity, and inclusion policies and programing in corporations and characterized the current progress of Black women as stalled or regressing despite good intentions. E. L. Bell and Nkomo (2021) shared noteworthy comparisons

over the two decades since the original publication. In 2001 there were only six women CEOs in the Fortune 500, and none were Black. The authors reminded the reader that Black women encountered concrete walls versus the glass ceilings that White women faced. They insisted that in 2001 and in 2021, gender alone does not determine the obstacles or the experience of women in leadership in the corporate workplace. The barriers for Black women that E. L. Bell and Nkomo first reported were reconfirmed 20 years later in the Lean In (2020) report, *The State of Black Women in Corporate America.* Things had not changed very much. There was insufficient advocacy, recurrent microaggressions, isolation, and lack of visibility.

E. L. Bell and Nkomo (2021) reported a major shift in context in the United States since their first publication. In 2001, America was focused on global terrorism following the 911 attacks. By 2021 America was preoccupied with domestic terrorism, police brutality towards Black people, a global pandemic, and the aftereffects of the 45th President of the United States who fueled racial intolerance and White supremacy. E. L. Bell and Nkomo observed that much had changed, yet much remained the same for Black women leaders in corporations. Despite this, E. L. Bell and Nkomo (2021) were optimistic about future progress because corporate leaders had acknowledged the existence of systemic racism. They emphasized that correctly naming the issue was the first step to fixing it.

Career Advancement Barriers Black Women Leaders Encounter

E. L. Bell and Nkomo (2001) compared the career advancement experience of Black women to White women, in terms of the experience of climbing over a resistant wall versus breaking through a glass ceiling. *Concrete ceiling* was the term created to describe the more resistant and uniquely different barriers Black women leaders encountered in the pursuit of career advancement in organizations compared to the glass ceiling White women encountered.

Black women reported that after they advanced or climbed over the concrete wall, the wall remained, a reference to the systemic nature of the barriers they faced.

Numerous authors have concurred that barriers to advancement for Black women leaders appeared on the surface like some of the barriers experienced by White women and other people of color: but they were different and were experienced differently. The barriers reported most frequently since 2000 were microaggressions, stereotyping, invisibility, hypervisibility, and being viewed by others as outsiders (Beckwith et al., 2016; E. L. Bell & Nkomo, 2021; Catalyst, 2004; Durr & Wingfield, 2011; Erskine et al., 2021; Holder et al., 2015; Pompper, 2011; Sims & Carter, 2019).

Black women experienced limited access to resources that had been demonstrated to be essential to career advancement (Catalyst, 2004; R. Thomas et al., 2020). Examples of resources that had constrained access for the Black women were access to information, staffing and funding, influential advocates, visibility to senior hierarchy, high-impact assignments, advancement opportunities, and role models that look like them. The experience of exclusion was linked to the status of being invisible or viewed as an outsider. Another frequently reported obstacle was the existence of raced or gendered organizational cultures reflecting White male cultural norms.

Lowe (2013) asserted that the primary barriers for Black people advancing to higher level leadership assignments were often invisible and unconscious. The process to address or undo unconscious or invisible barriers was found more challenging than ones that were easily seen or resulted from conscious behaviors. In raced and gendered organizations, values, beliefs, practices, processes, and behaviors operate clandestinely to create and maintain gender and racial inequities. Extensive research suggested that many of the obstacles experienced by the Black and

women leaders in organizations were the manifestations of a raced and gendered organizational culture skewed to the values, beliefs, and norms of a White male majority culture (J. Acker, 1990; E. L. Bell & Nkomo, 2001; Lowe, 2013; Parker, 2002, 2004). E. L. Bell and Nkomo (2001) reported that the Black professional women had to learn White male culture. The authors used the term "biculturality," which is interchangeable with the term "code-switching," to describe the ability of Black women to operate effectively across both Black and White cultures. *Code-switching* is used to describe the ability to shift or switch between different languages and cultural norms to fit in better, be better understood, and increase personal effectiveness. Biculturality or code-switching also enabled the Black women to diminish how much they stood out and strategically lessen their hypervisibility (E. L. Bell & Nkomo, 2001; A. N. Smith et al., 2019). Raced and gendered organization cultures were environments with elements that invited, tolerated, and perpetuated the barriers experienced by Black women leaders.

The weaponization of stereotypes, the use of microaggressions, and the experience of invisibility, hypervisibility, and the phenomena related to outsider status were frequently reported barriers experienced by Black women leaders seeking career advancement to executive levels.

Stereotypes

Stereotypes—symbolically constructed images—have been mentioned frequently as barriers to career advancement for Black women in leadership positions. (Adams & Lott, 2019; Allen & Lewis, 2016; Beckwith et al., 2016; E. L. Bell & Nkomo, 2001; Catalyst, 2004; P. H. Collins, 2000; Erskine et al., 2021; Holder et al., 2015; Reynold-Dobbs et al., 2008). Beckwith et al. (2016) and Reynolds-Dobbs et al. (2008) reported that stereotypes were a tool of racism and sexism, used to embarrass, attack, demean, and isolate. Stereotypes of Black women have

evolved: Black women stereotypes include the caretaker "Mammy"—the self-sacrificing woman who takes care of those around her—the loud-talking, dramatic, bossy "Sapphire," the seductive "Jezebel," and more recently, the unstable "Crazy Black Bitch" and the overachieving Super Woman (Adams & Lott, 2019; E. L. Bell & Nkomo, 2001; Holder et al., 2015; Reynolds-Dobbs et al., 2008). Early stereotypes categorized Black women as nurturers, compromisers, and sexual manipulators, while more modern stereotypes present an image of aggressive, over-achieving, and angry women.

Some literature proposed that White leaders lack of experience with professional Black women results in any Black women being seen only as Black women with whom they had experience such as domestic workers, secretaries, and subordinates (E. L. Bell & Nkomo, 2001). The existence and use of stereotypes works in concert with three other primary barriers Black women leaders encountered in the workplace: microaggressions as a form of racism and sexism, invisibility and hypervisibility, and versions of outsider status. The use of different stereotypes results in different outcomes (Allen & Lewis, 2016). The seductive Jezebel stereotype creates a lack of respect and the objectification of Black women. In contrast, the projection of the Angry Black Woman stereotype often causes self-silencing by the Black woman, resulting in invisibility, hypervisibility, isolation, or exclusion in an outsider experience.

Microaggressions: A Form of Racism and Sexism

Microaggressions are among the most common barriers faced by Black women leaders (Catalyst, 2004; Holder et al., 2015; Lean In, 2020). Microaggressions are verbal or non-verbal, intentional, or non-intentional, conscious or unconscious exchanges between a perpetrator and a target that subtly demean or dismiss a person. Racism and sexism have become more subtle in their presentation since the 1960s in most geographies in the United States as both

have come to be viewed as alienating or politically incorrect despite the underlying beliefs held by individuals.

In the case of Black women, microaggressions were found to be linked to their race, gender, or both. Allen and Lewis (2016) found that Black women experienced microaggressions based on the stereotyped images that exist. Williams (1991) labeled the impact of these hundreds or thousands of injuries from microaggressions as *spirit murder*. It has been suggested that microaggressions often seem insignificant at the time but can have significant and cumulative impact over time (Holder et al., 2015; Sue & Spanierman, 2020). Hall and Crutchfield (2018) described microaggressions as the daily exposure to microinsults, microinvalidations, and microassaults. Microaggressions are often committed by well-meaning persons under the cover of color blindness or unconscious bias and are frequently invisible to most due to their subtle nature (Adams & Lott, 2019; Sue & Spanierman, 2020). It has been reported that the often subtle, unconscious, or unintentional nature of the assaults made them easy to explain away; however, it did not lessen the impact on the Black women (Hall & Crutchfield, 2018; Holder et al., 2015). It has been asserted that Black women experience a more comprehensive range of microaggressions and experience them twice as often as White women and three times as often as all men (Lean In, 2020; R. Thomas et al., 2020).

The psychological consequences of such daily assaults are significant (Holder et al., 2015; R. Thomas et al., 2020). Experiencing microaggressions can be compared to the commonplace story of the frog placed in a pot of water on a stove top which is then slowly brought to a boil. Initially, the temperature's steady increase is hardly perceptible, but soon, it is too late: the water comes ever so slowly to a boil, and the frog dies. E. L. Bell and Nkomo (2001) reported that daily doses of racism are often explained away by saying that it was a joke, a

mistake, or not important. The research on microaggressions found that the target of the microaggressions often did not realize that they had been targeted at the time or sense the impact of the assault. But the accumulated effect is significant (Hall & Crutchfield, 2018; Sue & Spanierman, 2020). Dnika et al. (2016) reported an "emotional tax" (article title) from the experience of microaggressions, which results in the target feeling constantly on guard, disrupted sleep patterns, and a reduced ability to contribute at work. The literature often connects microaggressions to stereotyping, feeling invisible, hypervisibility, and outsider status.

Invisibility and Hypervisibility

Invisibility and hypervisibility have been identified as common obstacles of career advancement of Black women leaders (E. L. Bell & Nkomo, 2001; Catalyst, 2004; Erskine et al., 2021; Sims & Carter, 2019). Settles et al. (2019) proposed that the combination of minority group status and underrepresentation creates a token status resulting in the experience of both invisibility and hypervisibility. Hypervisibility refers to feeling under extraordinary scrutiny or attention from the majority group because of visible differences (Catalyst, 2004; A. N. Smith et al., 2019). E. L. Bell and Nkomo (2001) reported another type of visibility: being placed in highly noticeable roles that benefit the company but not the career of the Black woman. E. L. Bell and Nkomo (2001) labeled Black women in these situations as "affirmative action cover girls" This harkened back to 1980s when job placements of Black managers in the 1980s were put on display in what were termed racialized roles, roles that uniquely focused on Black communities, clients, and issues. Invisibility presented in many ways. This reflected a lack of recognition and representation as legitimate leaders, authority figures, candidates for high impact roles, and promotions (A. N. Smith et al., 2019). Intersectional invisibility was described as the invisibility experienced by those with multiple underrepresented social subgroup identities

because of not belonging to the majority social subgroups, White people, and men

(Purdie-Vaughns & Eibach, 2008; A. N. Smith et al., 2019).

The most reported type of invisibility Black women leaders faced in the workplace is

being intentionally or unintentionally excluded by others. Exclusion or being overlooked for

acknowledgment, input, information, advocacy, high-impact roles, career development training,

and exposure to hierarchy are frequently given as examples (E. L. Bell & Nkomo, 2001;

Catalyst, 2004; Lean In, 2020; Settles et al., 2019; A. N. Smith et al., 2019). Invisibility has often

been reported as microaggression with the associated consequences. Invisibility and exclusion

are seen as drivers of career stagnation and even the decision to resign from the organization

(Anderson et al., 1981; E. L. Bell & Nkomo, 2001; Catalyst, 2004; Lean In, 2020; Vardi, 1980).

E. L. Bell and Nkomo (2001) described the pressure Black women leaders felt to fit in

while also seeking to remain authentic and consistent to who they are and what they represent.

Black women leaders also report making themselves invisible as a coping strategy to reduce

unwanted attention (Allen & Lewis, 2016; Davidson, 1997; A. N. Smith et al., 2019).

An unexpected outcome of the increased visibility beyond the added scrutiny is being

expected to take on additional work such as sponsoring Black and women's networks groups,

mentoring and coaching a long list of women and Black leaders, and coaching White hierarchy

on the issues related to Black employees (McCluney & Rabelo, 2019). This type of work is

typically not recognized or valued compared to work assigned to White males. As a result, this

additional work does not contribute to performance assessment required for career advancement

despite the high value placed on the work by most Black and female employees. Visible and

non-visible differences from the majority group that resulted in the hypervisibility of Black

women in the workplace such as skin tone, hair texture and style, speaking patterns, body type, and preferred work attire also contributes to outsider status (McCluney & Rabelo, 2019).

Outsider Status

The perception of being an outsider in the organization has been acknowledged as a common obstacle to career advancement for Black women in leadership (E. L. Bell & Nkomo, 2001; Catalyst, 2004; Fulbright, 1985; Nkomo & Cox, 1990; Rosette & Livingston, 2012; A. N. Smith et al., 2019; Wilder, 2015). Stereotypes of Black women have served to further separate them from others, culminating in feeling isolated, excluded, or not welcome, an outsider (Adams & Lott, 2019; Carton & Rosette, 2011; Parker, 2003; Reynolds-Dobbs et al., 2008). A. N. Smith et al. (2019) proposed that perceived outsiders could be viewed simultaneously as a threat, intriguing, and an object of curiosity. Black women are perceived as a deviant from the norm, contributing to their hypervisibility and the being seen as outsiders. Black women executives in large corporations exist in an elite world closed to most in terms of education, experiences, hierarchical position, and compensation (A. N. Smith et al., 2019).

Multiple angles of outsider status exist—feeling isolated, feeling excluded, feeling like an outsider inside the organization, and double-outsider status. Double outsider status has also been referred to as the double whammy, double tokenism, double jeopardy, and double minority in the literature (E. L. Bell & Nkomo, 2001; Catalyst, 2004; Fulbright, 1985; Nkomo & Cox, 1990; Rosette & Livingston, 2012; A. N. Smith et al., 2019; Wilder, 2015) though "double outsider" is used most frequently. Several researchers found that Black women leaders in the 21st century feel like outsiders in their organizations across organizational sectors and levels (Beckwith et al., 2016; E. L. Bell & Nkomo, 2001; A. N. Smith et al., 2019; Wilder, 2015).

The expression "outsider-within" described a common experience of Black women leaders in primarily White organizations (Byrd, 2009; P. H. Collins, 1986). They are different from the majority group, yet a member of the elite leadership, an outsider, operating inside. P. H. Collins (2000) argued that Black women leaders live in two worlds, their Black culture or community, and the majority workplace culture—but they never feel at home in either. Academic and professional preparation, workplace roles, and the privileges of their compensation packages also can leave Black women leaders feeling as outsiders within the Black community (A. N. Smith et al., 2019). They have had to learn to straddle both worlds. This links to the concept of biculturality, or code-switching discussed previously, which means operating effectively in two or more cultures.

Black women leaders were frequently the first, the only, or one of a few of their race and gender in a type of work or position, in a meeting, on a team, or in the organization, which contributed to the experience of outsider status (Lean In, 2020). An implication of being perceived as an outsider within the organization is intentional and unintentional exclusion from informal and formal activities, including networking, development opportunities, and informal networks and gatherings (E. L. Bell & Nkomo, 2001; Catalyst, 2004). A consequence of the double outsider status combined with low representation at the higher leadership levels is feeling isolated (Beckwith et al., 2016; E. L. Bell & Nkomo, 2001; Catalyst, 2004; Davidson, 1997; Roberts et al., 2019). Barriers that Black women leaders experienced were more substantial than their White counterparts and experienced differently. This required different coping strategies and different strategies for successful career advancement. The next section of this chapter will address career advancement success strategies.

Career Advancement Success Strategies for Black Women Leaders

Strategies are simply choices to be actioned to increase the probability of a particular result. In the case of this literature review, the desired result is the advancement of more Black women leaders to executive positions in large, primarily White organizations. There are two categories of strategies that can support the career advancement of Black women leaders. The first category comprises those to be actioned by the Black women themselves to facilitate survival, coping, and thriving. The second category are those to be actioned by the senior leadership of the Black women leaders and their companies. Erskine et al. (2021) defined thriving as a psychological state characterized by vitality, learning, high energy, passion for their work, and dissatisfaction with the status quo. Both categories of strategy for support of career advancement of Black women leaders have been studied and discussed widely (Beckwith et al., 2016; E. L. Bell & Nkomo, 2001; Catalyst, 2004; Erskine et al., 2021; Holder et al., 2015; McGlowan-Fellows & Thomas, 2004; Parker, 2002, 2004; R. Thomas et al., 2020).

Career Advancement Strategies to Be Actioned by Black Women Leaders

The most crucial strategy to be actioned by the Black women leaders to accelerate career success is to consistently meet or exceed performance expectations (Catalyst, 2004; Davidson, 1997). Four other frequently mentioned success strategies used by Black women were: to demonstrate effective communication skills, get involved in high-visibility projects, develop, create and maintain a support network, and attain and maintain influential advocates (E. L. Bell & Nkomo, 2001; Catalyst, 2004; Combs, 2003; Davidson, 1997; Erskine et al., 2021; Holder et al., 2015; McGlowan-Fellows & Thomas, 2004; A. N. Smith et al., 2019).

Important to meeting and exceeding expectations is reaching agreement on appropriate expectations with leadership and then delivering or exceeding these. Stretch goals—goals that are set well above ordinary standards— should be identified, as opposed just ordinary commitment. Demonstrating effective communication skills, including written and verbal, approach, and sense of timing, is a commonly reported success strategy for Black women leaders (Catalyst, 2004; Holder et al., 2015; Parker, 2003; Sims & Carter, 2019). Advocating for and accepting high visibility, high impact assignments is a high leverage strategy to advance in an organization along with willingness to take risks (E. L. Bell & Nkomo, 2001; Catalyst, 2004; A. N. Smith et al., 2019). Risk taking in assignments or relationships is an attribute associated with men. However, it can be effectively utilized by Black women in leadership (Combs, 2003; Davidson, 1997).

Formal and informal support networks are also reported to be essential to advancement (E. L. Bell & Nkomo, 2001; Catalyst, 2004; Combs, 2003; McGlowan-Fellows & Thomas, 2004). The networks can help to validate the woman's experience, provide advice, resist internalizing negative messages, and provide awareness and access to resources (Davidson, 1997; Holder et al., 2015). Influential advocacy has also been identified as a significant contributor to advancement for Black women (Catalyst, 2004; Holder et al., 2015). Advocacy is said to be most common from persons in the position of boss, a coach, a mentor, or sponsor (Catalyst, 2004; Erskine et al., 2021; McGlowan-Fellows & Thomas, 2004). Advocating for oneself can be an impactful strategy to consider—however for Black women leaders, it can be a risk not worth taking as it can sometimes create the appearance of being selfish and boastful. All advocacy is not helpful advocacy even from others; a non-credible advocate may do more harm than good.

Career Advancement Strategies to Be Actioned by Company Leadership

The role of leaders is to align people to the vision and, despite obstacles, inspire them to reach it (Kotter, 1996). E. L. Bell and Nkomo (2001) found that an overwhelming majority of Black women who reported feeling supported with their career advancement said that this reaction was because of individuals, not policies or practices (Lean In, 2020). The Lean In study found that policies that addressed acceptable and unacceptable behavior were often not sufficiently clear to hold employees accountable or individuals were not held accountable by leadership. Lean In (2020) further reported that the starting point for effective policies of this type is a vision of work culture that embraces all employees at all levels in the organization, including Black people, women, and Black women.

My review of the literature found significant overlap between success strategies to be actioned by the Black women leaders to advance their careers and those identified for action by their leadership. The leadership or corporate strategies reported most frequently had four themes: culture of inclusion, influential advocacy, visibility of the Black women leaders in all elements of the organization, and relationships with influential leaders characterized by trust, transparency, and respect (E. L. Bell & Nkomo, 2001; Catalyst, 2004; Combs, 2003; Davidson, 1997; Erskine et al., 2021; Hankins, 2000; Holder et al., 2015; McGlowan-Fellows & Thomas, 2004; Parker, 2004; R. Roosevelt Thomas, 1991; R. Thomas et al., 2020).

The most successful strategies identified for senior leaders to accelerate the career advancement of Black women leaders were equally appropriate to support the career advancement of all marginalized group members. The four strategies documented most often to produce success for Black women leaders were not mentioned as drivers of advancement Vardi's (1980) or Anderson et al.'s (1981) career mobility models. The Vardi model identified gender as

an individual variable to consider but did not take into account the gendered nature of organizations. The Anderson et al. model identified gender and race as an individual characteristic, noted that ethnic identity was related to advancement, and reported that Black leaders were less optimistic about career success.

A culture of inclusion was the most frequently mentioned success strategy for corporations or senior leadership to facilitate career advancement of Black women leaders (E. L. Bell & Nkomo; Hankins, 2000; Parker, 2004; R. Roosevelt Thomas, 1991; R. Thomas et al., 2020). Lean In (2020) defined an inclusive culture as one where all employees feel a true sense of belonging. It is essential to assess individual organizational culture elements such as customs, rituals, and norms to ensure they are inclusive (Hankins, 2000; Lean In, 2020; R. Roosevelt Thomas, 1991; R. Thomas et al., 2020). Erskine et al. (2021) highlighted the importance of identification and elimination of cultural behaviors or elements that could be interpreted by Black women as explicit bias or microaggressions. R. Thomas et al. (2020) stated that employees need to be empowered to speak up about all forms of racism and sexism. They further suggested making the experience of being the "only" less common by hiring more Black women, clustering the Black women in organizations and project teams, and creating and supporting formal networks for coaching, learning, and support.

Advocacy by influential leaders was a frequently reported success strategy for the career advancement of Black women leaders to be pursued by senior leadership in companies (E. L. Bell & Nkomo, 2001; Catalyst, 1999, 2004; Davidson, 1997; Hankins, 2000; R. Thomas et al., 2020). Advocacy also included the inclusion of high-performing Black women leaders in leadership development programs (Catalyst, 1999, 2004). Catalyst (1999) reported that while the percentage of Black women leaders had increased significantly, they were more likely than

White women to have had sponsors and mentors who lacked power and influence. R. Thomas et al. (2020) argued that company leadership should have a diverse slate of candidates for all positions, insisting that more than one minority candidate must be considered to give a fair chance for the minority candidates to be seriously considered.

Visibility was a theme in success strategies of company leadership frequently mentioned in the literature to advance the careers of Black women leaders (E. L. Bell & Nkomo, 2001; Catalyst, 2022; Erskine et al., 2021; Hankins, 2000; R. Thomas et al., 2020). Full transparency, or visibility, of all performance expectations was reported to be a critical element for Black women to advance (Catalyst, 2004). Some literature emphasized the importance of visibility in high-impact assignments to increase the probability of advancement (E. L. Bell & Nkomo, 2001; Catalyst, 2004; Davidson, 1997; Hankins, 2000). Another effective action for company leadership was increasing visibility to senior leadership so that the Black women can share accomplishments, receive coaching, and advocacy. Lean In (2020) argued the importance of the visibility of representation targets and results by gender and race combinations, versus gender and race separately. Lean In also reported that many organizations treat gender and race as separate issues; Black women can be overlooked within groups both of all Black people and of all women with such an approach. Hankins (2000) further suggested that targets be set in a way that they are visible to the organization, can be monitored, and that the targets be expanded beyond representation, to mentoring, sponsorship, and professional development.

The development of relationships with influential leaders that were characterized by trust, transparency, and respect was reported as a successful strategy for career advancement of Black women leaders (E. L. Bell & Nkomo, 2001; Catalyst, 2004; Erskine et al., 2021; Hankins, 2000; McGlowan-Fellows & Thomas, 2004; Sims & Carter, 2019; R. Thomas et al., 2020). E. L. Bell

and Nkomo (2001) argued that the higher women progressed in organization levels, the greater became the importance of relationships with influential leaders in supporting career advancement of Black women leaders, as compared to business achievements. Providing honest feedback on job performance, including interpersonal relationships and teamwork, was uncomfortable at times for both the person giving feedback as well as the Black woman receiving the feedback, yet it was essential. Catalyst (2004) suggested that relationships between Black women and senior leaders must go beyond the immediate work interests. They must get to know each other as individuals, and know their values, and interests outside work. Relationships characterized by trust and respect were identified as helpful when there was difficult feedback to share, or when other courageous conversations were required.

Summary and Conclusion of the Literature Review

The representation of Black women in executive level positions in large, primarily White companies is a long-standing issue. A lightning rod for the issue of representation at the executive levels in large corporations is the dismal record of Black women CEOs in the Fortune 1000. In the history of these companies, there have only been four Black women CEOs. While many of these companies are over 100 years old, the reality is that Black women did not enter the corporations in meaningful numbers in entry level management positions until the 1980s. The first Black woman Fortune 1000 CEO was appointed in 2009 by Xerox corporation. There have only been three more through 2021.

Three of the four of the Black women Fortune 1000 CEOs led Fortune 500 companies and one led a company listed in the Fortune 501 to 1000. It is discouraging to learn that the number of Black women CEOs in the Fortune 501 to 1000 was one-third that of the Fortune 500. Comparing this to the high visibility provided to the three Fortune 500 Black CEOs was

interesting to me. Prior to beginning this research, I knew the names of all three Black women who led Fortune 500 companies and the disproportionately low-level of representation compared to proportion of Black women in the general population with graduate degrees and long work histories in large corporations. I was unaware of Lisa Wardell who was the CEO of Adtalem Global Education from 2016 to 2019. I had wrongly assumed that if the Fortune 500 had three Black women in CEO positions, the Fortune 501 to 1000 would have many more. My assumption was clearly incorrect. Learning this information increased my curiosity to learn more about Black women in the Fortune 501 to 1000. What contributed to the appointment of one-third fewer Black women to CEO compared to the Fortune 500, and why is this so under-reported and invisible in the literature? The issue of advancement of Black women to the top positions in large American corporations is nuanced, and even more serious than I had imagined.

There were ample theories and conceptual frameworks to frame the problem in practice of low representation in executive-level positions, why it existed, the overall experience of the women involved, and the potential indicated actions to address the problem. The theories and conceptual frameworks facilitated understanding of the experience from the 30,000-foot level. The literature provided models or ways of thinking about career advancement; however, most did not address the experience of professional Black women seeking career advancement in companies. The Dickens and Dickens (1982) four-phase model for career advancement of Black managers and the Bell and Nkomo (2001) six phases of flash point experiences of career advancement proved helpful to framing the overall career advancement experience of Black women leaders. Figure 2.1 summarizes the major findings from the literature, relevant theories

and conceptual frameworks, barriers to success, the general phases of development, and the

success strategies to be actioned by the Black women, and their leadership.

Figure 2.1

A Summary of the Literature on Career Advancement of Black Women Leaders

The primary theories and conceptual frameworks were expectation states theory, leader

categorization theory, the theory of gendered and raced organizations, Black feminist theory,

intersectionality, critical race theory, and critical whiteness theory. The phases of development

introduced by Dickens and Dickens (1982) for Black managers—entry, adjustment, planned

growth, and success—were general in nature and consistent with more current literature on Black

women leaders. E. L. Bell and Nkomo (2001) identified the six flashpoint phases which they

described as watershed moments that led to opportunities, frustration, and struggle. These

flashpoint phases were also consistent with more current literature. The six phases were as follows:

1. Breaking in,

2. Fitting in,

3. Barriers to advancement,

4. Climbing over barriers,

5. Making change, and

6. Work isn't everything.

Progression through the phases is not necessarily sequential. A change of assignment, a different employer, or a career advancement critical incident could initiate changing phases. The most common barriers presented across the entire career advancement process were, stereotypes, hypervisibility and invisibility, racism and sexism including microaggressions, the experience of outsider status, and the existence of raced and gendered organizations. The success strategies to be actioned by the Black women and their leadership were effective across the entire span of a career but were identified in the context of moving from middle management to executive levels. Figure 2.1 is context for the new model created from the data from the investigation to summarize the findings and key insights as presented in Chapter IV.

The literature on Black women leaders in organizations has increased significantly in quantity and breadth of topics over the past 40 years. The theories that facilitated understanding have expanded as well. The representation of Black women in executive levels in large, primarily White corporations has improved and yet the results remain disproportionately insignificant compared to the availability of qualified pool of women at this time. This research contributes to the body of work on the career advancement experience of Black women in large,

primarily White companies and to the history of use of CIT use in studies on the topic. The next

chapter, Chapter III, will address the methodology used in this research study.

CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

This is a qualitative research study. Qualitative research involves asking participants about their experiences of things that happen in their lives (Austin & Sutton, 2014). A qualitative approach contributes to understanding a perceived situation and attempts to make sense of, interpret the meaning of it and the associated phenomena (Bengtsson, 2016). Critical incident technique (CIT; Flanagan, 1954) was the methodology selected for this study. CIT was developed nearly 70 years ago by John Flanagan as a quantitative methodology which today is used in qualitative research as well. The methodologies that dominated the literature reviewed were ethnographic, phenomenological, and case studies. The choice of CIT for this study contributes to the literature on this topic as previous research on this specific topic was not found. The remainder of this chapter will address the historical use of CIT, the researcher, and the study design, including participant criteria and recruitment, data collection and analysis, and the approach to ethics and trustworthiness.

Critical Incident Technique Overview

Flanagan (1954) developed CIT to identify critical behaviors for pilots in the Aviation Psychology Program of the United States Army Airforce in World War II. Flanagan's original CIT approach is referred to more recently as "classical CIT" (Ellinger & Bostrom, 2002, p. 285). It was rooted in a positivist approach and the origin was in industrial and organizational psychology. The initial technique included observation or a simple interview process to collect data from people who directly observed the behaviors. The methodology emphasized the importance of the number of incidents as opposed to the number of participants as the most important unit of analysis.

An essential element of CIT is the definition of a critical incident. Flanagan (1954) emphasized that a critical incident included three parts: the critical incident itself, the antecedent or what led to it, and the outcome or what happened as a result. The methodology required a clear definition of what constituted a critical incident to ensure consistency across the study. Flanagan defined CIT as a set of procedures for collecting direct observations of human behavior to facilitate solving practical problems and developing broad psychological principles. He further described the CIT process as having five steps:

1. Determine the purpose of the study,

2. Develop the study plan and criteria for the study elements,

3. Collect the data,

4. Analyze the data, and

5. Interpret the data and report results.

The initial positivist nature of classical CIT was apparent in the suggested incident sample size of 100 incidents, the approach to rigor, the quantitative language used to describe the process, the predominant use of trained or expert observers, and the suggested validity and credibility checks.

CIT facilitates the formulation of critical requirements of an activity based on information from those in the best position to make observations and evaluations (Flanagan, 1954). The analysis enables the researcher to identify patterns and explore insights into the activity examined. Flanagan (1954) suggested that researchers look across Steps 1 through 4 for potential bias in the process and transparently address the possible impacts on interpretation in step five. For several decades after the 1950s, the social sciences emphasized quantification in experimentation and utilization of CIT declined (Woolsey, 1986). While CIT was initially

employed in a positivist paradigm as a quantitative methodology, it has evolved to be used by researchers with interpretive and constructivist approaches to research. CIT methodology evolved in response to changing research assumptions and approaches. Ellinger and Watkins (1998) reviewed 40 years of history of CIT studies and reported modifications from the classical version that were consistent with a constructivist approach as a suggestion for updating the technique. Butterfield et al. (2005) conducted a similar but more in-depth review of the evolution of CIT over 50 years. They provided recommendations for future use respecting the method as articulated by Flanagan while embracing the demonstrated flexibility over time including the increased acceptance of qualitative methods. In the post-modern environment, CIT was viewed as an investigative tool versus a scientific instrument that could be used in an interpretive, constructivist paradigm, ontology, and epistemology (Chell, 1998). A review of CIT (Ellinger & Watkins, 1998) decades after it was introduced, identified a different approach to trustworthiness and credibility. Their approach was more consistent with a post-modern constructivist approach where participant perspectives were considered possible events versus realistic descriptions where the researcher was more interested in their interpretations than authenticity.

Butterfield et al.'s (2005) 50-year review of CIT reported four significant departures from the classical approach of Flanagan: expansion of the areas studied, reduced emphasis on direct observation and a retrospective self-report, an expectation of documentation of the analysis categorization process, and a suggested approach to ensure trustworthiness and credibility. Butterfield et al. suggested nine rigorous improvement options for trustworthiness and credibility that were more consistent with a positivist research environment. Bott and Tourish (2016) reviewed the use of CIT in organizational studies. Their approach to ensure trustworthiness was

more consistent than that of Ellinger and Watkins (1998); it leaned more toward a constructivist and interpretivist approach.

The Rationale for Critical Incident Technique in This Study

The focus of this study is the career advancement of Black women leaders in large American companies. CIT is an appropriate methodology for this study for a variety of reasons. It offers proven and clearly defined guidelines for data collection and an analysis approach which is appropriate for a novice researcher while offering reasonable flexibility. In the 1990s, researchers began using CIT in studies with a more interpretive perspective. The focus was to develop an understanding of the meaning and experience dimensions for the individual and the social world in which they exist (Fossey et al., 2002). According to Yuki (1981), CIT contributes to exploratory research designed to investigate specific, situationally appropriate managerial behaviors, which is consistent with the aims of this study.

There are many advantages to utilizing CIT in this study. The CIT process offers proven and clearly defined guidelines for data collection and analysis (Bott & Tourish, 2016; Butterfield et al., 2005; Flanagan, 1954). It is flexible in the elements of the design and execution (Bott & Tourish, 2016; Woolsey, 1986). CIT investigates real situations and can provide insights into what was effective or not in a known context (Kandola, 2012). A benefit of CIT is that it is best suited for research questions that seek to answer what helped or hindered some experience or activity (Viergever, 2019). A principal factor that made CIT a good fit for a study on Black women's career advancement is that CIT invites the participants to determine which incidents were critical in the context of their lived experiences (Edvardsson & Roos, 2001). Additionally, a CIT self-reporting design is well suited to give voice to silenced or marginalized perspectives versus relying on an observer to define the criticality of incidents. The participant is best

positioned to determine the most critical incidents, not observers or persons who may see the context or incidents from a privileged, different, or unknowing perspective.

Participants can use their language and jargon to describe their experience and context. CIT studies are unique among the qualitative methodologies in their focus on practical problems (Kemppainen, 2000). Underrepresentation of Black women in executive roles is a long-standing problem in search of a solution. These are the primary reasons CIT is an appropriate methodology for this research study. The following section will address the historical use of CIT in studies focused on areas adjacent to this study.

The History of CIT for Related Research Topics

CIT has a history in the study of leadership and change (Cope & Watts, 2000; Ellinger & Bostrom, 2002; Hutchins & Rainbolt, 2016), career development (Betsworth & Hansen, 1996; Blenkinsopp & Zdunczyk, 2005; Dix & Savickas, 1995), and the implications of race and gender (Kostamo et al., 2019; Luke & Sinclair, 1991; Wyatt & Silvester, 2015). While my literature review did not detect any CIT studies that focused on the career advancement experience of Black women leaders in corporations, one study was located that utilized CIT to study the career advancement of Black, minority, and ethnic leaders of all genders in the public sector in the United Kingdom (Wyatt & Silvester, 2015).

The previous CIT studies in areas adjacent to this study provide examples of choices and techniques that were considered for inclusion in this study design. Cope and Watts (2000) explored the critical learning events of entrepreneurs. They extracted critical incidents from a story of the history of the business creation and growth told by the entrepreneur. Their six participants were all male; the race of the participants was not identified. Ellinger and Bostrom (2002) investigated the critical behaviors of managers in facilitating the learning of others. An

external reviewer with 15 years of experience was used to confirm theme development accuracy. One of the 12 participants was female, but the race of participants was not identified.

Hutchins and Rainbolt (2016) used CIT to examine triggers of the imposter phenomenon in faculty. The interview protocol was piloted with three faculty members and later edited to improved clarity and relevance. There were 16 participants; 10 were females, six were male, and the participants' race was not identified.

Betsworth and Hansen (1996) examined serendipitous events that significantly impacted career development. The researchers used three independent judges to facilitate the accuracy of the coding process. There were 237 participants, 148 women, and 89 men, over 99% of the participants identified as White. Blenkinsopp and Zdunczyk (2005) researched mismatches in mid-career managers' role change and their response. The researchers asked the participants to document their reflective thoughts on their critical incidents before the interviews. There were seven participants, two were men, and five were women. The race of the participants was not identified. Dix and Savickas (1995) studied the most critical steps in establishing careers and the coping responses. There were 50 participants; all were intentionally male. The single gender choice was made to exclude women because the researchers felt that women's traditional roles in the home and with the family that might create uniquely different critical events.

Luke and Sinclair (1991) explored the incidents that contributed to positive and negative attitudes to physical education for male and female adolescents. The participants were 488 Grade 11 secondary students, 233 boys, and 255 girls. The race of the participants was not identified. Kostamo et al. (2019) researched triggers that changed physical activity regimes during childhood. The researchers were interested in differences between the girls versus the boys. There were 33 participants, 14 boys, and 19 girls. The race of the participants was not identified.

Wyatt and Silvester's (2015) study most closely resembled the aim of this study. They investigated the career experiences of Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) leaders in civil service organizations in the United Kingdom. They included White and BME participants to enable a comparison of their experiences. The participants were required to complete a career timeline before the interview to encourage reflection in advance of the interview. Interviews were recorded and transcribed for accuracy. There were 40 participants, 20 BME and 20 White. The White group had six men and 14 women. The BME group included five men and 15 women. The BME group included four persons of various ethnic heritage, it included Black Africans, Black Caribbeans, Indians, Pakistanis, Chinese leaders, and three leaders of mixed heritage.

It was surprising to me to realize the substantial number of studies, using CIT as well as other methodologies, that did not identify the participants' race as a demographic unit for analysis in the 21st century. In contrast, all identified gender. It is problematic that scholars in this century either were not aware of the impact of race on life experiences or chose not to address it or share their reasoning to exclude race from the analysis and discussion of their findings. The CIT methodology has been utilized effectively in research on leadership and change, career development, and exploring implications of race and gender. It is flexible enough to allow a myriad of choices to customize the design and stay true to the methodology.

Researcher Positionality

My lived experience as a Black woman with over 20 years as an executive in a Fortune 50 company has influenced my research agenda. I did not achieve a position in the C-suite prior to retirement. I had a successful career by my standards and realize that my experience is not the experience of most Black women leaders in White organizations. My experience fueled my interest to better understand the career advancement experiences and insights of other Black

women who achieved the executive level. During my 35 years of management work experience, I attended numerous leadership conferences and was an active participant in networks focused on women, Black women, and Black managers. I do not recall being exposed to the themes in the literature on Black women leaders in the conference sessions I attended. The implied assumption in the conferences was that all women had a similar experience and that all Black people had a similar experience. Intersectionality was not a term I was exposed to until I began research for this project. I was fortunate to have the choice to participate in affinity groups for Black women only, yet the data on the unique obstacles and the theoretical context to help with meaning making was not presented that I can recall. The sessions were of a great benefit to me because they provided content that inspired discussion and a safe environment for the Black women who participated.

My doctoral journey significantly increased my awareness of the gaps in my understanding of the differences in career advancement experiences related to gender, race, the dual marginalized social group status of Black women in professional positions, and the systemic and individual drivers of the differences. I have coached and advocated for numerous leaders and continue to do so today. I wonder how I could have coached differently the Black women seeking executive roles, their bosses, mentors, and advocates. My desire to be a better coach of Black women (and those who support their advancement) was fueled by disappointment, frustration, and emotional and physical health consequences I experienced personally, as well as the negative effects of insufficient generational wealth in the Black community. I believe the first step to doing better is knowing better. One of the aims of this project is to help myself and others know better so that we can do better.

My lived experience has directly influenced the design of this study. The study focuses on the experience of Black women leaders in large corporations who achieved executive level positions and is a direct result of my familiarity with the experience and my desire to help those on a similar journey. The choice of the methodology was influenced by my curiosity to explore things new to me. My awareness of CIT was limited to a single classroom session designed to provide an overview of multiple methodologies. A faculty member asked if I considered CIT and I instantly responded "no" and explained my reasons for why it was not a fit for my research. The primary reason was that I thought CIT was best used on matters affecting life or death situations. The professor then provided me with some materials on CIT for me to broaden my understanding. I learned that self-reporting is now routine versus expert observation and that CIT has been applied in areas of organizational learning. As I reflected more on the possible choice of CIT, I realized it could be a perfect fit in that the incidents that helped or hindered career advancement of Black women in White organizations, were often experienced as a micro life or micro death experiences. I also realized that these experiences had a cumulative effect on me and others. My desire was to do what I could to help understand, process, and heal past experiences while supporting Black women leaders and those that support their advancement moving forward. It seemed this methodology would support that desire.

My beliefs and assumptions related to my research approach were influenced by my life experiences. My research approach is constructivist and interpretivist. Creswell and Poth (2018) described the ontology of constructivism and the beliefs about the nature of reality that support constructivism. They defined constructivism as based on the belief that multiple realities are constructed through lived experience and interactions with others. I believe there are multiple realities in social and organizational inquiry. Creswell and Poth described social constructivism's

epistemology—the belief of how reality is known—as being constructed between the researcher and the participant and shaped by individual experiences. In an interpretivist design, the literal accuracy of the incidents is less important than the significance the participants attach to them (Bott & Tourish, 2016). Consistent with the thoughts of Doldor et al. (2017), I think that meaning making and interpretation occur in the context of the environment, experiences, and cultural influences. I believe that knowledge and meaning are constructed through experience, interaction, and reflection. I believe researcher bias cannot be eliminated but that the negative impacts can be minimized while allowing the bias to contribute positively to the interpretation of the data.

Research Context and the Research Questions

This study expanded the understanding of the career advancement experience of Black women who achieved executive positions in Fortune 1000 companies in the United States through the lens of self-defined critical career advancement events or incidents. The research questions were as follows:

1. What were the most impactful incidents that helped or hindered the experience of career advancement for Black women executives in large corporations in the United States?

2. What were the frequently occurring types of incidents, the antecedents, and the outcomes?

3. What implications and recommendations emerged from the findings?

The study sought understanding of the participants' experiences, interpretation of their experiences, and the meaning constructed from their experiences. The use of career advancement critical incidents to explore their experience revealed new insights and confirmed key elements

in the literature. The data patterns and insights were interpreted through the lenses of expectation

states theory, leader categorization theory, the theory of gendered and raced organizations, Black

feminist theory, and critical Whiteness theory. There have only been four Black women CEOs in

the history of the Fortune 1000. If the participants' experience, the findings, the discussion, or

the recommendations are helpful to even one Black woman leader, her advocates, a human

resource professional, or any other person committed to the advancement of Black women

leaders, this study in my eyes will be an overwhelming success. The underrepresentation of

Black women in executive level positions is so significant and the numbers of Black women in

these CEO positions are so small. If this study influences the career advancement of even one

Black woman to join the C-suite in any capacity, it could significantly impact the career

advancement of Black women in Fortune 1000 corporations.

The Study Design

The objective of the study was to explore the experience of career advancement of Black

women who achieved executive level positions in Fortune 1000 companies. The study design

was qualitative and used CIT. The design was focused of the participant self-identified critical

career advancement events or incidents.

The study used interviews to collect data. The design targeted to obtain two to four

incidents per participant. A completed informed consent form was required to participate. The

design was to interview until thematic saturation was achieved for the types of incidents. There

were 20 participants with executive-level experience in 29 Fortune 1000 companies. The data

was collected, analyzed, interpreted, and discussed. Practical implications were identified, and

recommendations were proposed for Black women leaders, their advocates, company leadership,

women and Black leaders, and diversity, equity, and inclusion professionals. Participant criteria

and the recruitment strategy will be discussed in the next section.

Scope of the Study

The scope of a study was determined by choices I made but also by conditions that were

out of my control. The decision to focus on Black women in large corporations was driven by the

long-term underrepresentation in these organizations, my familiarity with large corporations, and

the impact these corporations have on many people such as shareholders, employees, customers,

and the communities in which they operate. Large corporations are defined here as Fortune 1000

corporations.

The decision not to place time boundaries on the occurrence of the critical incidents was

to enable the participants to determine the incidents that were most impactful over their careers.

The participant requirement of a minimum of 15 years of leadership work experience was to

limit participation to proven and tenured leaders. Another choice was to limit the time required to

participate in the study. Participation in the study required less than two and a half hours. This

included email correspondence, the reflective prework assignment to identify critical incidents

and insights, and the actual CIT interview. Once the participants were selected the process and

confirmed consent to participate, the process of data collection began.

Data Collection

Participant Criteria and Recruitment Strategy

Participants were recruited from Black women who achieved executive level positions in

Fortune 1000 corporations. The participants were Black women who achieved executive-level

roles in Fortune 1000 corporations with 15 or more years of management work experience in the

United States. Any participant who had engaged in an active relationship with me in the past 15

years was excluded from participation. The aim was to have a diverse participant group, diverse in years of leadership work experience, employers, and industries.

The recruitment strategy was purposeful sampling through known contacts who functioned as referral agents, social media, and professional organizations. Known contacts who referred participants were not informed of participation status of their referral or any other information about the participant. The participants were screened to ensure they met the required criteria.

Interview questions were provided to the participants before the interview and the participants were offered the opportunity to complete a reflection exercise as prework to facilitate the interview process. Participants were provided with an information sheet that was shared with potential participants (Appendix A). It contained the participant criteria, the study purpose, information about the researcher, expectations of participants, and the approach to privacy and confidentiality. This document provided the participants an overview of the scope of the study.

Participant Screening

The informed consent process and the collection of demographic data was executed by email. All potential participants received the "Communication for Participant Referral" (Appendix A), which describes the overall study, and the demographic requirements form (Appendix B). Participants received an email that requested the completion of the informed consent form and the demographic summary form which they were asked to complete and return to me. Participants who met the criteria and complete the informed consent form were scheduled for an interview, given the reflective prework, and asked to identify a pseudonym to attach to their data to ensure privacy and confidentiality.

Interviews were not initiated without a completed and returned informed consent form. Morgan and Symon (2004), discussing research design and the process for electronic interviews, emphasized the importance to ensure the participants understood the intent and plan related to privacy. This is especially important when working with an underrepresented or marginalized population and when researching incidents that may be sensitive to the participants and their work colleagues as in this study. Information about the importance of confidentiality and privacy was shared with the referral agents and the participants repeatedly. Morgan and Symon stressed the importance of communicating to the participants that they could choose not to participate. This was critical because a trusted friend, mentor, advocate, or boss referral could create an uncomfortable situation after a referral. Morgan and Symon suggested it was a good practice to offer the participant alternative ways to communicate beyond email ones thatt could be more comfortable or confidential in their mind. My phone number was provided as an alternative to email as an option early in the process.

Prework, Interview, and Data Storage

Upon receiving the informed consent form and confirming the required demographics, the participants were sent an email with the prework request. The prework request was a 30-minute reflective task to identify the six to eight most impactful career advancement critical incidents that had helped or hindered career advancement. They were asked to make brief notes about each incident. The prework assignment was not intended to be returned to me. Participants were asked to share personal insights from completing the prework assignment at the end of the interview. This data was reviewed but not included in the CIT analysis. The prework document is shown in Appendix C. Bott and Tourish (2016) noted that when CIT participants were not

asked in advance to consider their critical incidents, they could find it challenging to recall incidents in an interview.

A semi-structured interview was used to collect the data. The primary purpose of the interview was to capture data on the career advancement critical incidents. The interview yielded data on the participants' perspectives on critical incidents. Interviews were conducted and recorded on Zoom. Otter.ai was used as the transcription service.

Several factors drove the decision to use the Zoom video option to conduct the interviews. The design assumption was that most participants would not be located physically near the researcher, and most want to avoid nonessential travel. The interviews were conducted during the COVID-19 global pandemic. In-person meetings with strangers during a pandemic were not encouraged. Zoom or other on-line video applications are familiar to most in professional positions, are accepted for professional use, are convenient, time-saving, and cost-efficient. Unlike some other video-conferencing applications, Zoom does not require participants to have an account or download a program (Archibald et al., 2019; Gray et al., 2020). Zoom also includes the option of password protection for confidentiality. Long-term storage of the interview recordings is not on the Zoom platform: they are saved on the researcher's personal computer. Saving recordings to the host's private and secure devices enhances participant confidentiality (Archibald et al., 2019; Gray et al., 2020). Otter.ai was selected for transcription because it works well with Zoom, the response time is fast, and the transcription accuracy is high. Some people experience technical difficulties with online video applications (Archibald et al., 2019). However, this was a minimal risk for the population targeted in this study. Both Otter.ai and Zoom have privacy statements online that are easy to

access by the participants, and both are well-known organizations for the services that will be used in the study.

Zoom forwarded the audio and video file data files by email. The audio file was forwarded immediately to Otter.ai for transcription. When the transcription file was received, I edited for privacy and accuracy and then sent files to the interviewee with the invitation to review it and provide feedback on accuracy or privacy. I requested this be within 72 hours so that the experience would be fresh in their memory. The participant review of the transcript is known as member-checking (Birt et al., 2016; Morse, 2015). If there was no response in the timeframe provided, it was assumed that there was no input. The audio and video files were stored on two of my personal devices and deleted from the Zoom cloud storage following the completion of the dissertation. Zoom automatically deletes the files from the Zoom cloud within a year. The member-checking process and the elimination of interview data in cyberspace both support participant privacy and confidentiality.

An interview guide was used to ensure consistency across interviews (Appendix D). The presentation of interview questions impacts how helpful the responses will be (King, 2004). The interview guide provided space for me to make notes during the interview. These included but were not limited to my perception of the participant's energy or emotion, body language, a connection to a response from another interview, or the literature. Following the initial greetings, the participants confirmed their chosen pseudonym, were asked if they completed the prework, and asked if they have any questions before beginning the recording. Chell (1998) stated that once confidentiality and anonymity are assured, the interviewee usually relaxes and can recount their story.

The participants, in an order of their choosing, shared their most impactful critical incidents that had helped or hindered their career advancement. They were asked to share up to four incidents. However, in subsequent analysis it was apparent that recollection of a single incident could include more than one incident.

The suggested format was to describe the incident, what happened, what led to the incident, and the incident outcome(s). The participants all intentionally shared four incidents as a minimum of two incidents was required for this study. The interview format allowed for follow-up questions to provide additional data to complete the incident. The interview process closed by my asking if the participant would like to share anything additional about their career advancement critical incident experiences. Following the interview, I spent up to 30 minutes privately to review the interview notes and make annotations on content and process. The interview process ended when thematic saturation was achieved. I completed three additional interviews to verify saturation. Thematic saturation in qualitative research is defined as obtaining the most salient or material items instead of all items. It has also been described as reached when less than one novel item arises for each additional participant (Weller et al., 2018). Thematic saturation was achieved at 64 incidents. A total of 80 incidents was collected to verify the emergence of no new themes.

Inclusion of participant data in the study required that they complete the full interview, defined as a minimum of two incidents plus questions related to insights. Alvesson and Ashcraft (2012) noted that "interviewing is a complex social activity that calls for careful, intensive and skeptical reflection" (p. 255). The research process provided learning for all involved including Black women, leadership, academics, and consultants. There were additional actions taken in the study that were not initially planned. These further contributed to the trustworthiness of the

design. Journaling or memoing began after my proposal hearing to produce an audit trail. The

initial entries were made by hand in a notebook. The data from the notebook was transferred into

a Word document as time allowed. The transfer to a Word document enabled electronic search

capability for all entries which increased ease of locating items for reference and analysis. These

additional tools, approaches, and processes contributed to trustworthiness along with measures in

the original plan. This is consistent with the interpretive-constructivist approach to research.

Once all the data was collected, the process of analysis began.

Data Analysis, Interpretation, and Reporting

An inductive approach was used to analyze the data. This involved using raw data from

interviews to derive themes It is a process to condense multiple data points to the critical few (D.

R. Thomas, 2006). The transcript text for each of the four incidents was separated into a unique

file for coding on an incident level. The incident—not the participant—was the unit of analysis

for CIT. The four incident files per participant were coded for antecedents, incident descriptors,

outcome elements, context, nuanced words, notable quotes, and insights. Coding is a process of

assigning category titles to data to identify patterns across a broader set of data. It is essential

because themes are the crux of qualitative research findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Software tools are available to assist researchers with data management. Software

applications for managing and analyzing are especially useful when a study is large, complex,

and includes multiple research methods. They also enable handling more complex data sets and

more thorough data analysis, including identifying relationships between the data (Maher et al.,

2018). Coding for CIT is different from other types of qualitative research in that the first level

of analysis is the individual incident, not the interview (Bott & Tourish, 2016; Viergever, 2019;

Woolsey, 1986). The second level of analysis focused on the three components of the critical

incident, the antecedent, the actual incident, and the outcome. The antecedents, incidents, and outcomes were coded consistent with CIT methodology (Butterfield et al., 2005: Edvardsson & Roos, 2001; Flanagan, 1954; Woolsey, 1986). A coding partner was used for calibration and learning. A detailed description of actions planned to increase trustworthiness in the coding process is outlined later in this chapter. The codes were input into Dedoose, a coding software application, as the foundation to interpret the data. The demographic data was also added to Dedoose to enable identification of potential patterns between the themes and the demographic data. Categories or themes were developed from codes.

The interpretation of the data began with a review of the demographics and the critical incident data. Notations made during and after the interviews were reviewed to facilitate interpretation and meaning making. Chapter IV reviews the data themes in detail supported by illustrations from the interviews. Chapter V includes the conclusions, insights, recommendations, and areas for future research. Chapter V identifies the key findings and insights from the study that may be applied in practice by Black women leaders, their leadership, their advocates, and diversity, equity, and inclusion professionals to facilitate career advancement for Black women leaders. Chell (1998) proposed that there are two paths of research that have been used in CIT. One examines how the phenomenon has previously been defined, presented, and identifies additional aspects to research the issue. The other considers that the phenomenon or problem needs to be redefined. Chapter V will explore both options in the discussion of the findings.

Ethical Considerations

The protection of the participants in this study was of the utmost importance. No research project is risk-free. Areas of risk to consider and proactively address are psychological harm to the participants, their privacy, consent, confidentiality, honesty, integrity, and responsible data

handling. Steps were taken to minimize these risks end-to-end in the qualitative study, including interactions with the participant and the management of the data. The Antioch University Institutional Review Board (IRB) process was used to ensure the study design included appropriate steps to minimize the risks in all areas while providing the benefits of the study outweigh the risks.

The known contacts were briefed on the approach to ethical considerations to increase their comfort with me as a credible and trustworthy researcher and increase the likelihood of referring participants. Potential participants who had a prior relationship with me within the past 15 years were not considered for the study. Participation in the project was voluntary. The study participants were informed of the research questions, the data collection process, and the tools to collect and manage the data to make an informed consent decision before confirming participation.

Each participant completed an informed consent form (Appendix E) before providing any personal data in the screening and prework call. Referral agents were not informed of the participation status of the persons referred. The participants all identified a pseudonym to connect with their data to protect confidentiality in the recruitment process and beyond. Only I was aware of the relationship between pseudonyms, given names, and organization names. The participants were informed that they could, if they so wished. discontinue participation at any time without any adverse effects. These design choices were used to protect the participant's privacy and confidentiality. All participants were provided the contact information to an individual on the Antioch University IRB committee during the informed consent process to use if they had questions or concerns.

Data management is an area of ethical risk with the increased use of electronic communications and data management in communications, data collection, data analysis, and data storage. The participants were asked to provide an email of choice for communication and were encouraged to consider choosing a non-work email. Pseudonyms were used to manage the data. The data was recorded using Zoom's video capability. Transcription of the interview audio data file was completed by a third-party organization (Otter.ai) after scrubbing it for data that could link it to a particular participant. Each participant had the opportunity to confirm that the scrub was sufficient. Thirty percent offered input. Both Otter.ai and Zoom have comprehensive privacy policies online in easy-to-access locations. Both platforms commit to protecting the privacy of the client who purchased the applications and those who chose to collaborate with the client. Both companies have increased their public profiles during the pandemic. The choice of these products for on-line collaboration was influenced by their public reputation and familiarity.

Risks are inherent in qualitative research. In a qualitative study of this type, the experience of psychological harm, rejection, or retaliation is a real risk. The process of recalling, sharing, or reflecting on stressful or emotional experiences as a part of the study and the risk of lost privacy or confidentiality could result in psychological harm to the participant and real or perceived rejection or retaliation if their data or participation were to be exposed. There is a power imbalance between a researcher and a participant. This power imbalance could violate participant's boundaries, such as sharing information beyond their comfort level.

These are real and significant risks for this study. Design choices have been made to reduce these types of serious risks. All participants were made aware of a national resource that provides psychological support services in the IRB application in the event participation triggered a reaction that required external support. I am not aware of any situations that required

external support although many interviews included emotional moments for the participants and the researcher.

The above sections on participant recruitment, data collection, and analysis have addressed actions to address privacy and confidentiality end-to-end across the study design. The need to maintain a level of comfort that is appropriate for the participant was also important. Comfort levels can vary for participants in similar situations. Life outside the interview can affect what is comfortable at a given time for a given person. Care was taken during the interview process to be aware of the personal boundaries of the participants. This was done by being aware of the participants' verbal and non-verbal clues and proactively checking their comfort level if a personal comfort boundary may have been at risk.

The Approach to Ensure Trustworthiness

The requirements to demonstrate rigor in a qualitative design differs from those in a quantitative design (Maher et al., 2018). Qualitative findings must be able to be trusted. Trustworthiness has emerged as a term to convey rigor in qualitative research (Birt et al., 2016; Butterfield et al., 2005; Maher et al., 2018). Trustworthiness is a measure of trust or confidence in the research findings. Four key contributors to trustworthiness have been identified: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Credibility implies the truth of the participant's voice is accurately represented. Transferability connotes the ability to apply the findings in similar contexts. Dependability indicates the consistency of implementation of the design. Confirmability signifies that the results are driven by the participants and not researcher bias (Birt et al., 2016; Butterfield et al., 2005; Maher et al., 2018; Morse, 2015).

The literature review identified various options that contribute to rigor in the study design that are also consistent with my interpretive framework of constructivism. This study proposed the following actions to contribute to rigor:

- Clear participant criteria including no recent (past 15 years) relationship with the researcher.

- Use of a concise definition of a career advancement critical incident.

- Recording and transcribing of the interviews after which participants were offered the opportunity to review the transcript for accuracy and privacy.

- Engagement of a person familiar with CIT for coaching on mechanics and methods; the use of a coding partner to facilitate consistency.

- Interviewing until thematic saturation is reached.

This dissertation process utilized a three-person committee to look for gaps in rigor in the process in the proposal and the dissertation. These actions contributed to the rigor of the design as defined by credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability in a way that was consistent with the interpretive-constructivist approach to the research. The CIT study design was effective in the recruitment of participants, the collection of data to address the research questions consistent with the ethical standards for this type of research and ensured trustworthiness end-to-end consistent with the methodology and the researcher worldview.

CHAPTER IV: RESEARCH FINDINGS AND RESULTS

This research study was inspired by the underrepresentation of Black women leaders in executive levels in large American corporations. It was designed to identify the career advancement events experienced by Black women who achieved executive levels in Fortune 1000 companies that they thought were most impactful in helping or hindering their career advancement. A constructivist-interpretivist approach with CIT was used to collect and make meaning of the data provided by the participants through interviews.

This chapter begins by describing the participant demographic data, the process of data analysis, and the data themes associated with the most impactful career advancement critical incidents for Black women executives in large corporations. There follows a brief review of the problem in practice that inspired the study, the study purpose, the research question at the heart of the study, and the research process. The chapter concludes with a summary of the key findings as a bridge to Chapter V where these findings are discussed in greater detail, including interpretation, conclusions, and recommendations.

Participant Demographics

The study used purposeful sampling for the recruitment of the participants. There were four criteria for participant inclusion in the study:

1. To self-identify as a Black (of African descent) woman.

2. To have worked a minimum of 15 years as a manager in a Fortune 1000 corporation.

3. To have achieved an executive level in a Fortune 1000 corporation.

4. To have not had an active relationship with the researcher in the past 15 years.

Potential participants who did not meet any of these criteria were excluded from participation.

There were six demographic characteristics identified to describe the participants in the study:

- Age of the participant

- Total years of management experience

- Primary sector of work experience

- Primary area of functional expertise

- Number of Fortune 1000 employers over their career

- If the participant received an undergraduate degree from a Historically Black College or University (HBCU).

Table 4.1 displays this information. The participant group was mostly women over 50 years old (85%) who did not receive an undergraduate degree from an HBCU (70%), with 20 to 30 years of management work experience (60%), whose primary sector of management experience was consumer packaged goods (50%), with functional expertise in supply chain management (40%), human resources (20%), and Sales and Marketing (20%), and worked for only one Fortune 1000 company during their career (45%). All but one participant (95%) worked for other non-Fortune 1000 employers in management positions during their careers. The participants in this study were in the workforce as managers from 1975 through 2022. The study included participants from 29 Fortune 1000 corporations.

Table 4.1

Participant Demographics and Frequency (N=20)

DEMOGRAPHIC CATEGORY	DATA RANGE/CATEGORY	FREQUENCY, N (%)
Age	Age Range	
	41–50	3 (15)
	51–60	10 (50)
	61–70	7 (35)
Undergraduate Degree from Historically Black College or University	Yes	6 (30)
	No	14 (70)
Management Experience in Years	15–19	2 (10)
	20–25	7 (35)
	26–30	5 (25
	31–35	2 (10)
	>35	4 (20)
Primary Sector of Work Experience	Financial Services	4 (20)
	Health Care	3 (15)
	Food	1 (5)
	CPG	10 (50)
	No Primary	2 (10)
Functional Experience Area	Finance & Accounting	2 (10)
	Human Resources	4 (20)
	Legal	1 (5)
	Operations Management	1 (5)
	Sales & Marketing	2 (10)
	Supply Chain	8 (40)
Number of Fortune 1000 Employers	1	9 (45)
	2	4 (20)
	3	3 (15)
	4	2 (10)
	5	1 (5)
	6	1 (5)

The Data Analysis Process

The interviews were conducted on Zoom, transcribed, redacted, and the participants were invited to review their transcript and offer edits for privacy and accuracy. The redacted transcripts were forwarded to the coding team for input on the process, context, characterization of the critical incidents, and overall observations and insights. A preliminary characterization of the critical incident type was made before the detailed coding based on the approved transcript. During the interview, the participants were asked to share up to four significant events or critical incidents in traditional CIT nomenclature. Some participants shared more than four incidents without realizing it; what was shared as a single incident often contained two or more related but distinct incidents. The four incidents per participant used for the CIT analysis were selected based on completeness, defined by the inclusion of an antecedent, the actual incident, the outcome, the strength of impact assessed by the participant, and the contribution to saturation. Contribution to saturation meant that the incidents that contributed the greatest saturation were put aside. This process occurred seven times. For example, if any participant had not previously shared an incident associated with health issues, it would be included versus an incident type previously shared. The preliminary incident types were logged by participant and incident number and recorded in a tabular format and tracked for saturation. Table 4.2 is a sample of the full table as an example of the format.

Table 4.2

Preliminary Incident Type by Interview Example

Incident #1	Incident #2	Incident #3	Incident #4
Laid Off	Lack of Feedback from Boss / Heard it from Next Level Boss	First and/or Only/ Advocacy (affinity member)	Advocate/ Strong Relationship
Bad Boss/ First and/or the Only	Advocate and First and/or the Only	Transferred Out of Organization	Not Ready/ Not Polished
Doing Next Level Work Without Promotion	Acquired More Education / 1st and only	International Job	Leveraged Relationships (affinity member)
Good Boss/ Affinity Connections	Bad Boss: Poor Coaching/ 1st and, or only	Good Boss/ Leveraged Affinity Connections	Changed Scenery/ Moved Location

The preliminary incident type characterizations were tracked throughout the interview process to assess when saturation was achieved. Commonly occurring codes were grouped into categories and characterized by a description that was inclusive of all. The categories were grouped into themes for the antecedent, the incident type, and the outcome. The categories and themes for the antecedents, incident types, and outcomes were reviewed to identify possible overarching themes. Discussions with the coding team provided additional perspective on the interview data and the process and influenced the category and theme development. The summary by participant of tabular incident coding, Dedoose coding application, a combined 20-interview summary document, the contemporaneous notes made on the interview guides, and the researcher memo journal were all used in combination with the various discussions with coding team members to create categories of codes and the themes through a reiterative process. The next step was to review the categories for possible overarching themes. The final step of the

analysis was to examine the themes for potential relationships to the participant demographic groups. Figure 4.1 illustrates the end-to-end data analysis process.

Figure 4.1

End-to-End Data Analysis Process

```
┌──────────────┐    ┌──────────────┐    ┌──────────────┐    ┌──────────────┐
│  Interview   │    │ Preliminary  │    │ Review and   │    │  Separate    │
│  obtained,   │    │identification│    │integration of│    │transcript into│
│ redacted, and│ →  │ of incident  │ →  │  input from  │ →  │ five parts,  │
│ approved for │    │  type for    │    │ coding team  │    │the four incidents│
│     use      │    │ assessment of│    │  members     │    │  and the rest│
│              │    │  saturation  │    │              │    │              │
└──────────────┘    └──────────────┘    └──────────────┘    └──────────────┘

┌──────────────┐    ┌──────────────┐    ┌──────────────┐    ┌──────────────┐
│  Coding of   │    │ Memoing of   │    │  Commonly    │    │ Categories   │
│ antecedents, │    │  context,    │    │  occurring   │    │ grouped into │
│ incident type,│ → │nuanced words,│ → │codes were    │ → │  dominant    │
│  outcomes    │    │ quotes, and  │    │grouped into  │    │  themes      │
│              │    │  insights    │    │ categories   │    │              │
└──────────────┘    └──────────────┘    └──────────────┘    └──────────────┘

              ┌──────────────┐    ┌──────────────┐
              │Data reviewed │    │Comparison of │
              │for potential │    │ categories to│
              │relationships │ ←  │discover possible│
              │    with      │    │ overarching  │
              │ demographics │    │  themes      │
              └──────────────┘    └──────────────┘
```

The degree of overlap of the data across the sub-incident categories was unexpected. The category characterizations were not unique to a sub-incident part. Said differently, there was a higher level of overlap between the codes and categories identified for antecedents, incidents, and outcomes than expected. Additionally, a single CIT incident as shared by the participants often contained multiple antecedents, multiple incident type descriptors, and multiple outcomes. It was noted that the outcome of one incident was often the antecedent of another. These complex relationships challenged the analysis process. This complexity influenced the approach

to analysis to shift temporarily from the traditional CIT approach of delineating themes by antecedents, incidents, and outcomes to consider an alternative analysis process. The alternative process considered was to group the categories by critical happenings or critical events across the entire study versus the traditional CIT approach to group and analyze by the three sub-incident parts. This alternate CIT analysis method was borrowed from Norman et al. (1992). Additional research on alternative CIT analysis processes was undertaken and the data were reviewed many times and, in many ways, using the traditional CIT format.

Analysis of Incident Type with Demographics

The critical incident type themes were reviewed alongside the demographic categories of age, management experience in years, work sector, functional expertise, number of Fortune 1000 employers, and HBCU undergraduate degree for trends or relationships. No trends or relationships were identified. The analysis was limited to incident type. A more rigorous review of relationships with the approximately sixty unique data categories was not conducted. Such an analysis is an opportunity for future research.

Resulting Data

Twenty participants were in the study, each with four logged CIT incidents that resulted in a total of 80 incidents. Sixty percent of the incidents in the study were seen as helping career advancement, while 40% hindered advancement. The ratio of incidents that helped versus hindered was balanced yet skewed slightly to the positive, that is, to incidents that helped career advancement.

Each incident was comprised of three parts, antecedent, type, and outcome resulting in 240 incident parts. The coding process created approximately 600 codes for the 80 incidents in the study. There were nearly seven codes per CIT incident, resulting in 77 categories across the

three sub-incident parts. Twenty-five percent of the category groups appeared in more than one incident subpart; for example, the antecedent category of *not feeling welcomed* also appeared as an incident type category. The analysis process identified two overarching themes and five themes for each of the three sub-incident parts.

Overarching Themes

Two overarching themes were identified because their presence was strong across the entire study. They were core to the career advancement experience of Black women that achieved the executive level in Fortune 1000 companies. They were:

1. The experience of being the first and/or the only in a situation and

2. The existence of beliefs that sustained the participants over the challenging journey to the executive levels.

The evidence of these overarching themes varied in amplitude across participants, within a participant interview across incidents, and the evidence was everywhere. The evidence of the overarching themes was revealed in the antecedents, the incidents themselves, and the outcomes. The following section in this chapter will address these two overarching themes in more detail.

Overarching Theme 1: The Experience of Being the First and/or Only

The experience of being the first and/or only, emerged as the most dominant theme in the study. All 20 participants reported the experience of being the first and/or the only during their career journey to the executive level in Fortune 1000 corporations. There were many variations of the experience of being the first and/ or the only. Six primary variations emerged:

1. the first Black woman,

2. the only Black woman,

3. the first woman,

4. the only woman,

5. the first Black person, and

6. the only Black person.

Additional variations emerged based on the participant's unique position in the organization. Examples frequently reported were being the first or only in a particular job, in a functional area, at a job level, in a work group, or combinations of these. The codes associated with being the first and/or the only, strongly influenced the development of categories and the resulting themes. The participant descriptions of the experience of being the first and/or the only were often amusing, sometimes stinging, and frequently riddled with emotions. The descriptions varied across the participants; however, seven key descriptors emerged for the overarching theme: (a) having her qualifications or credibility questioned, (b) feeling isolated, invisible, and unwelcome, (c) being aware that she is different from the others, (d) feeling supported at work, (e) experiencing racism and sexism, (f) looking up and over and not seeing people that look like her, and (g) feeling empowered, accomplished, proud, hopeful, isolated, disappointed, or frustrated. The descriptors for the overarching theme, being the first and/ or the only, were well supported by the interview data end-to-end. Examples are provided below for each, along with the source and context where needed.

Having Her Qualifications or Credibility Questioned. Participants in first and/or only situations reported being told they were not qualified explicitly and implicitly. This happened to Participant 8 when she had been interviewed her for an internal position in the company where she worked and was asked if she had earned an undergraduate degree. She was astonished as she believed human resources had such documentation. She felt the interviewer could have confirmed this criterion for the assignment with the human resources department or her boss

before the interview to avoid wasting everyone's time. "So, I went to the interview. When I came

back, I was in tears . . . I was devastated. She was questioning whether I had an undergraduate

degree" (Participant 8). Participant 8 later shared that after that experience, she questioned her

sense of belonging in the organization.

Participant 17 shared a first and/or only experience involving an implicit assumption of

not being qualified, respected, and not feeling a sense of belonging.

> It wears on you as a corporate executive and a Black woman. It wears you out. You are
> coming to work being judged. You are coming to work knowing you do not fit in; you are
> coming to meetings with people assuming you are not in charge. When I would walk in,
> they would look at the white girl or the white man, assuming they were the vice
> president. They would say, she is over there, pointing to me. People were talking over
> me, taking my ideas. (Participant 17)

The evidence in the interviews was overwhelming; these first and/or only women

frequently did not feel welcomed in their organizations.

Feeling Isolated, Invisible, and Unwelcome. Participant 14 described feeling isolated

and an outsider: "It was tough early on. It was tough because I did not always know what was

going on. There were many times I felt isolated. I did not always feel included. It was tough."

Participants reported not being invited to informal social events but hearing the discussion about

these later, several told of not attending after work events that were focused on drinking because

they did not drink or felt uncomfortable drinking with work associates. A few participants

reported golfing events, some required, some to which they were invited, and some without an

invitation. In all cases they did not feel comfortable attending as they were not golfers.

Participant 4 described the experience of living in a small, rural, town with minimal people of

color of any type:

> They were very closed. They would wait 100 years for the house next door to go on sale
> so they can live next door to where they grew up in the same town with the same people.
> Their cousins worked in the police and the fire departments, another coached the little
> league, and that was who they were. That's why it was a tough place to assimilate …

they hired from the university in the same town. To get a job or a promotion you had to drink beer in the person's backyard responsible for making the decision. I did not drink beer in anyone's backyard**.**

Being Aware That She Is Different From the Others. Participant 9 described one of

her first and/or only experiences as lonely, longing to be her authentic self, and lacking support:

It was lonely. I attended a majority school. I learned how to navigate. There comes a time when you do not always want to feel like you must push or please. You want to be able to be yourself. Today, we talk about being able to come to work as yourself. That was not something that I was able to do back then. I was always in my mind going through scenarios. What do I say, what do I do? How's this going to impact others? . . . as a corporate person or as a Black woman. We all do that. But it was exponential because I was the only one, and I did not have a support system.

Participant 8 shared that her White work associates on more than one occasion would try

to convince her to move to the nearly all White suburb they lived from the more urban

mixed-race community she lived in:

Our lives are so different, a lot of them are suburban people. I am not. I never considered living in the suburbs. When I grew up, I did not live in the suburbs. Our experiences are just different... I'm trying to teach my child how to ride the local bus system, they think I am crazy. And I have had a lot of them say to me, you need to come out here and live with us. No, no, no. No, I need my child to be able to function and move. There is nothing wrong with living in suburbia. it is just a different experience.

Feeling Unsupported at Work. Participant 13 shared an experience at an executive level

position in an organization of not feeling respected for her position by her male peers. Other

participants reported not feeling respected or supported in the workplace.

I had to tell many of my male counterparts; I am not your administrator. I am not a party planner. None of that. So, if you want to get flowers, you might want to have someone on your team order flowers. If you want a party, form a party committee, and let them plan the party, but I will not plan it. (Participant 13)

Experiencing Racism or Sexism. Participants shared experiences from their first and/or

only situations of experiencing racism or sexism, varying from microaggressions to more overt

behaviors. Participant 20 recounted an incident of overt racism from 1989 when she was the first

African American woman in an organization in a Southern state. "I came home from work about

a week into the assignment and found a letter in my mailbox threatening me and my family. Of course, it was very upsetting" (Participant 20). The letter used intimidating language to threaten her and her family, making clear that Black people were not welcomed there. This incident occurred in the second of five decades in the timeframe covered by this study, and yet it is still shocking to have this experience as a senior manager in a Fortune 1000 company in 1989 in America.

Looking Up and Over and Not Seeing People That Look Like Her. Some participants discussed the frustration and disappointment of looking over and up from their level in the organization and not seeing leaders that looked like them. Participant 11 described her experience following retirement from a 30-plus year of employment with a Fortune 1000 company:

> I was the only and the first throughout my entire career. I never had another Black woman at my level in my function, ever. It took 17 years after I left for another to get to that level. It took 17 years to get another Black woman; that is ridiculous.

Feeling Empowered, Accomplished, Proud, Hopeful, Lonely, Disappointed, or Frustrated. The experience of being the first and/or the only, was accompanied by many feelings. The feelings associated with the experience were wide ranging in type and intensity. Many examples illustrated themes that have included an emotional component. Examples were far were more negative in nature. However, there were many positive examples as well. Participants shared feelings of pride, empowerment, a sense of accomplishment, and feeling hopeful in the interviews. Participant 14 had the opportunity to play a lead role in the executive search process for her boss. She was instrumental in the process to recruit her next boss, another Black woman. "Recruiting my boss was one of the most impactful projects that I had in my career. It provided me with psychological safety, it empowered me, it provided me visibility, and best of all, she coaches her pants off" (Participant 14).

This is another example of the emotions of the participants, all of whom experienced being the first and/or the only. They are evident in the many direct quotes shared in this chapter and the one that follows. Being the first and/or the only, was experienced by all participants on their journey to the executive levels, some more than others. While each first and/or only situation was different, each impacted the participants in the moment and often long after, influencing expectations, behaviors, and emotions. This overarching theme was the most dominant of all the themes identified at any level in the study. It emerged as a super theme. It appeared to influence or be connected to most if not all the critical incident categories and themes in some way. The second overarching theme, sustaining beliefs, was less dominant, however, it too was omnipresent in the study data.

Overarching Theme 2: Sustaining Beliefs

The second overarching theme—sustaining beliefs shared by the participants—was also core to the career advancement experience. The three sustaining beliefs expressed with regularity by the participants were having a strong faith or spirituality, having a strong sense of self-worth, and the belief that women leaders and Black leaders should support each other. These beliefs were expressed explicitly and implicitly. Explicitly they manifested in the frequent use of the words Lord, God, prayer, faith, worth, worthy, and by clearly stating the expectation that leaders with shared affinity group status should support each other and their personal passion and commitment to do the same. It manifested implicitly as being hopeful, optimistic, or having an unbridled commitment to support other women leaders and the extreme disappointment when other women leaders or Black leaders did not reciprocate that support. Central to this theme was the strong sense of optimism expressed throughout all the interviews despite the repeated and

unique challenges by all the participants. This does not mean the participants did not experience

hurt, disappointment or anger because they did, and these feelings are present in the data.

Throughout all the interviews, there was a continuous and overwhelming sense that the

glass was always 'half full' rather than "half empty." There was a persistent and strong sense of

hope about what was possible for them and the others that looked like them. The women in this

study believed all things were possible with their God and approached their career advancement

journey knowing that was their truth. This truth for them was expressed many times and in many

ways. This truth for them, along with the other shared beliefs, sustained them on their career

journeys as they evolved as people, leaders, and executives over the decades. The three

descriptors for the overarching theme, sustaining beliefs, were having a strong faith or

spirituality, having a strong sense of self-worth, and believing women and Black leaders should

support each other.

When the area of beliefs emerged as a possible second overarching theme, it was clear

that it deserved more exploration. It was apparent early in the interviews that something was

emerging related to hope, optimism, and a strong spirituality. For this discussion, spirituality is

defined as a belief in the sacred nature of life and the manifestation of these beliefs in the sense

of connectedness with others. For the participants in this study, faith is defined as a strong belief

in a higher power. Faith based on a formal religion and spirituality are different but overlapping

experiences (Mattis, 2002). A person can be spiritual but not religious. Throughout this report,

the terms faith and spirituality are used as the original speakers did.

It was initially unclear if the categories created from the coding process accurately

represented the participant's experience of sustaining beliefs. As a confirmatory exercise, the

participants were asked by email if there were any beliefs that they felt were important to sustain

them on their career advancement journey. The participant replies overwhelmingly supported the

three beliefs the initial analysis process had identified: a strong faith, a strong sense of

self-worth, and the belief that Black leaders and women leaders should support each other.

Having a Strong Faith or Spirituality. Participant 10 discussed having a strong faith as

a part of her career advancement journey:

> I was looking for a different job . . . I took a lateral move which did not offer a lot more
> salary, but it felt right to do at the time. My decision was based on purely gut instinct and
> a faith walk . . . It was a little scary . . . But again, I made the bet and took a leap of faith.
> I realized down the road, only a few eight months later, that had I not done that and
> trusted my instinct, my career would not have been what it ended up being,

> Participants 3 and 19 shared their perspectives on faith's role in their career advancement

experience. The words were few and clear. "How did I get through it, prayer. I mean, God. He

gave me another phenomenal position that that continued to elevate my career however, it was a

hurtful experience" (Participant 3). "I needed to learn how to survive, which really meant I

needed to learn to persevere, to be the last woman standing, to rely on my faith, to be able to be

brave, while maintaining my desire to be kind (Participant 19). Like others, Participant 19 hinted

that some of their experiences challenged their ability to behave in a way consistent with their

desire to be kind.

Having a Strong Sense of Self-Worth. The phrases "self-worth" and "knowing your

worth" were used often across the interviews. Declaring oneself "great" was another desrciption

of a similar concept. Many of the participants that discussed the importance of knowing your

self-worth alluded to the fact that this belief was something that emerged mid-way or later in

their career. Many participants did not join corporations with a healthy sense of self-worth.

Participant 9 shared her experience of coming to know her self-worth:

> I have worked in many different functions and experienced much success in my career. I
> decided it was time for me to stop saying yes and it was time for me to say no, and put

myself first. I knew what my worth was. This was very difficult for me… and I did not
have a support system that talked with me about my worth.

Participant 2 discussed her thoughts on the importance of knowing your worth:

You must like your work because there will be a lot of valleys. You must be comfortable
with yourself, know that you are good, that you are worthy, and that you are prepared
because many people will not believe that or tell you that you are.

 Participant 1 shared an experience of coming into knowing her self-worth:

I did good work; I knew I was good. I did not need anyone to tell me that I was good.
That was the first time I felt like I was not looking for others to validate me. I felt I would
be good somewhere else if they do not believe I am good at this company. I felt free. I
did not realize that until that moment, I was good. I no longer needed others to tell me
that I was good, because I then knew I was good. They can either decide I am good or get
somebody else, and I can work somewhere else . . . I remember times when I was not
healthy.

Believing Female and Black Leaders Should Support Each Other. All the participants

discussed receiving support from other Black leaders and women leaders. All the interviews

included examples of the participants supporting Black leaders and women leaders or being

supported by them as a part of their most impactful career incidents. Several participants

discussed experiences of Black managers, women managers, or— worse in their eyes—Black

women managers disappointing them by what the participants assessed as insufficient support.

All participants shared experiences of support or insufficient support in ways that clearly

conveyed an expectation that this type of support exists and a belief that it was not optional to

success in their careers. This theme was centered on the expectation of support, the joy of

receiving it, and the extreme disappointment when it was desired or needed and it did not

materialize. The participants viewed this type of support as critical to weather the storms of

isolation, uncertainty, disappointment, and challenge as they were often the first to explore new

areas. Participant 17 discussed not being supported by her White female boss after experiencing

a sexist behavior on a business trip:

> When I got back to the office, I shared what happened with my manager who was a white woman. I explained the incident to her and how uncomfortable it made me feel and how wrong it felt. The first thing she said was to ask me what I did you do to encourage that behavior ... In hindsight, expecting a White woman to come to my defense was probably not an expectation I should have had, or if it happens but it is not the norm.

The existence of affinity groups for women and Black leaders were essential to the learning, development, and coping for the Black women. They expected support from these leaders, and they appreciated it as many remembered the times when it did not exist. Participant 8 discussed her involvement in an internal company African American affinity network:

> The African American leadership group has really opened my eyes. We took in new members and we put them under our wings. They saw us, and eventually they were more of us, and that really matters. I wanted them to see more of us and know we were all here for them. In the earlier years, I did not have that.

The sustaining beliefs were a counterbalance to the experience of being the first and/or the only in that they facilitated meaning-making and coping. Whether it was engaging a higher power or humans, the two overarching themes often provided the context, the antecedent, and sometimes the provocation of the specific incident.

Critical Incident: Antecedent Themes

In CIT, the antecedent is what preceded the critical incident. Over 200 antecedent codes formed over 20 categories and five themes. The themes were as follows:

- being the first and/or the only

- having a strong faith or spirituality

- being new to company, type of work, level, or position

- experiencing strong support

- not feeling supported at work

Three of the five themes—the experience of being the first and/or only, having a strong faith, and feeling unsupported at work—were represented in the two overarching themes. The

two theme descriptors not represented in the overarching themes were experiencing strong

support and the condition described as being "new." The participants described being new most

often as being new to an organization, type of work, level, or a position. The experience of

strong support included both in the workplace and outside of the work environment.

The Experience of Being the First and/or the Only

This theme was the most dominant in the entire study and was discussed in the section

on overarching themes.

Having a Strong Faith or Spirituality

This theme emerged as a theme descriptor in the overarching theme of sustaining beliefs

and was discussed in that section.

Feeling Unsupported at Work

The experience of feeling unsupported in the workplace was identified as a descriptor in

the overarching theme of the experience of being the first and/or the only, discussed previously.

Being New to an Organization, Type of Work, Level, or Position

It is expected that people who achieve an executive level in an organization had many

new experiences, certainly new jobs, and new levels. The data in this study focused on the

incidents the participants felt were most impactful in helping or hindering their career. It is

noteworthy that every participant had at least one incident that involved in a new work situation.

The following are examples of being new shared by the participants as context for their most

impactful career advancement incidents. "I was a new young administrator that had just been

brought on board" (Participant 18). "I thought there is a lot of risk of starting over a new

location, a new company, a new everything, and my husband will need to follow me"

(Participant 1). "As a new manager, I observed that to get promoted, you needed to demonstrate

that you can manage a team" (Participant 3). "It happened when I was a young associate, a very new associate, maybe first or second year at the law firm" (Participant 5). "It was a new organization structure for the company" (Participant 11). "We were starting up a new… operation" (Participant 2). "I learned that when I was a new assistant manager" (Participant 10). "I was in my new role, my new company, and in a new opportunity" (Participant 12).

Being new in a situation was a frequently reported antecedent theme, surpassed only by being the first and/or the only and having a strong faith or spirituality.

Experiencing Strong Support

The experience of having strong support was not limited to the workplace. Many workplace experiences of strong support were associated with building and maintaining critical relationships with bosses, mentors, advocates, and female and Black professional colleagues. Strong supportive relationships with family and friends also played an important role in the participant's career advancement experience. The experience of strong support shared many codes with another theme in the study, building and maintaining critical relationships, which was the study's most prevalent critical incident type. The following are examples that illustrate the experience of feeling supported.

Participant 1 shared an intimate and emotional experience with a supportive spouse: "I came home, and I just talked to my husband about it. We agreed I should get some therapy because I think there are some things that I have not dealt with." Participant 7 described her first experience with international responsibility and her approach to creating an environment of support for herself:

> I had to establish my team. I put these people around me that were not only were good at their jobs, but that could accept me as their leader and help me drive my agenda. That was exactly what we did. I think it worked well because I listened, I tried to understand . . . and we were very successful. We developed the gold standard of training.

Participant 15 described the positive experience of having a good manager that supported

her. It should be noted that good bosses were reported as often as bad bosses in the study:

> I was with a fairly good manager who helped me understand very quickly what was important, what mattered and how to get things done. He provided a lot of encouragement, counsel, and support, and was very much an advocate for me. I felt like I was in the right place.

There was one antecedent code that did not align with the categories that produced the

key descriptors. It was *accepting a position without clearly understanding the job expectations*

and requirements. While the participant gained many insights and skills, the experience was one

that most would prefer not to have.

The antecedents in general served to set the stage for the incidents identified as most

impactful and were strongly influenced by the two overarching themes. The next section will

address the most frequently reported type of incidents that were identified as the most impactful

by the participants. An important design element was enabling the participants to determine

which events or incidents were most impactful in helping or hindering their career advancement.

This helped to minimize the impact of bias from the researcher or the literature in the

semi-structured interview.

Critical Incident Type Analysis

There were over 150 codes that described the critical incident types that formed over 20

categories and five themes. The themes were:

- building and leveraging critical relationships

- broadening knowledge, skills, and experiences

- leaving the company by choice or being forced out

- experiencing racism or sexism

- the recognition that their career was trending off-track.

The most dominant incident type theme was building, maintaining, and leveraging critical relationships. The relationships identified as most critical were those with the boss, the mentor, the sponsor or advocate and relationships with leaders and groups that shared the same social group identity, women, and Black people.

Building, Maintaining, and Leveraging Critical Relationships

The incidents involving critical relationships were the most prevalent type that participants identified. The relationships mentioned most were those with advocates, mentors, bosses, and persons with a shared social sub-group, a Black person, or a woman. As noted previously, the codes and categories for this theme strongly overlapped with the antecedent theme of having a supportive relationship. A frequently reported experience within the theme of the critical relationship was the experience of receiving more direct feedback from their Black bosses, mentors, and, or advocates in these critical relationships than from their White counterparts with whom they had critical relationships. Participant 2 discussed her perception of feedback from a Black manager as different from a non-Black manager. She was asked by the interviewer if her experience of feedback from a Black manager and a non-Black manager was different after inferring that it was different. She elaborated as follows:

> One thing that I felt with him (a Black man) was the spirit in which he gave it (the feedback) was fantastic. That was good. He would let me know what was really happening. He let me know what I was doing that was fantastic and what was not. (Participant 2)

Several participants talked about their belief that White managers, especially White men, were hesitant to provide direct, hard-hitting feedback to a Black woman because they feared ramifications such as being accused of racist behaviors. Participant 1 shared a positive onboarding experience to her first Fortune 1000 job in a location different from where she lived previously. This early experience of support translated into a lifelong relationship.

> The individual who contacted me was another African American female. I have had a lifelong relationship with her since I joined the company. And we have done life and life milestones together. I'm celebrating 20 years now, it's 20 years of not just having a peer mentor but a friendship. (Participant 1)

Participant 17 described the experience of learning that she would be asked to move to Asia because the White male candidate leadership preferred was not able to accept the offer. She accepted this crucible assignment in part based on the prework she was able to complete prior to being offered the assignment. A crucible assignment is one with high visibility and high impact. In some organizations a disproportional number of promotions are the result of strong performance in a crucible assignment. She reported that having the information in advance of the offer made her more comfortable during the discussion about the job. Her performance in that assignment contributed to her growth and future advancement.

> I am a Black woman. I knew they were coming to ask me about taking an international position because of the human resource network of Black Women. Thank you again to them. I would not have even known that this was working in the background. I was very angry it had gotten that far with me being involved. I talked to my husband ahead of time, and we did some research before they contacted me. I felt more prepared when I spoke to my leadership. (Participant 17)

Participant 7 related her experience while the female boss advocated for her to take a role with international responsibility, high visibility, and high impact with a sense of amazement in her tone: "She actually sponsored me to be offered a job with international responsibility. I was offered to be the director of an international team. I accepted the job as the head of the international team in the international division." Several participants expressed surprise when they were offered support by White women. This was not a common experience, so when it happened, surprise was often one of the first reactions.

Participant 20 was told she was ready to be promoted; however, no roles at the higher level were available. She reluctantly took a temporary role working on diversity to remain available until a role at the higher level became available for her. Her decision paid off. She

describes her experience in the temporary role and the result: "The role provided good exposure… across the company. That was helpful because that was how I met the future CEO. After I met the future CEO, it was not even three months later that I was promoted" (Participant 20).

Critical relationships were represented in all interviews as antecedents, incidents, and outcomes. The examples included many types of relationships that were identified as critical. Most of the examples involving critical relationships helped career advancement versus hindered it. The examples that hindered were mostly bad boss examples. The participant emphasized the importance of building, maintaining, and leveraging critical relationships.

Broadening Knowledge, Skills, and Experiences at Level

All participants had the experience of accepting a position at their current organization level with the opportunity to build skills to increase the probability of advancement later. Some took assignments at a level that was critical to the organization, crucible roles, accepting the risk of knowing that performance short of stellar would receive high visibility, public critique, and impact their probability for advancement in the future. Several participants shared a specific type of at-level assignment related to this theme positions with international responsibility, a specific type of crucible role while living in the United States or abroad.

Other participants broadened skills by gaining certifications adjacent to their expertise, while others attained academic degrees. Participant 14 was hired by a Fortune 1000 company in a non-management position without an undergraduate degree. This participant proudly shared her experience of attaining her undergraduate degree, graduate degree, and PhD while working full-time on her journey to the executive level.

> At the time, I had not completed college, but I was doing the work at a high level
> . . . Two years later, I was the highest-paid director within that organization because the

site was turned around opportunity . . . Later I decided to go back to school, and I went to school for ten years straight. I decided I was not going to participate in any graduation ceremonies until it was time for me to be hooded. That meant I was going to earn a doctorate. (Participant 14)

Participant 16 discussed broadening skills at a level that enabled increased exposure to hierarchy and resulted in a promotion that she did not believe would otherwise be considered for:

I started in finance, went to customer service, then distribution . . . I had never worked in the product initiative area . . . My mentor said to me, go and ask your boss if you can pick up some initiative responsibility right now, in your current job, just broaden your scope. That was the point, broaden your scope if you want to be considered for broader opportunities at a higher level and that's what I did . . . So those were great experiences that started me into bigger supply chain positions, to experience more control, see the bigger picture, and gain more exposure and influence.

Leaving the Company by Choice or Being Forced Out

Gone are the days where most leaders in large corporations start and end their careers in one company. The participants in the study left their companies several times before retirement. Only one participant worked for only one organization. Some left by choice, and some left without choice. Participant 12 expressed her surprise at being laid off. She knew she was the only Black person in the affected group and thought surely, they would not lay her off. When she approached her to manager to understand why she was selected to be laid off, the manager revealed that it was not performance-based. Her manager conceded that she had personal relationships with the two other managers that influenced her decision to keep them and terminate her employment.

There were three of us in manager-level roles and I was the one out of the three who had been selected to be laid off. I was disappointed and really surprised. It impacted me in a lot of ways. I was sad and depressed; I could not understand why I was selected . . . I had always received really good performance evaluations; the work that I was doing was meaningful, it made an impact, it was important to the organization and my manager at the time decided to lay me off anyway. (Participant 12)

Participant 3 discussed the hurtful experience of being fired and the unexpected upside:

She used every opportunity to sabotage my career. I would not be in the financial position I'm in now if I had stayed. My career blossomed after leaving, but the way I left was very hurtful. (Participant 3)

Experiencing Racism or Sexism

The experience of racist and sexist behaviors evolved over the five decades covered in this study, 1975 to 2022. The racism and sexism reported in the early days, the late 1970s and 1980s, were much more overt. During that period, participants reported blatant sexist and racist behaviors in the workplace and a high tolerance for those behaviors by company leadership at that time. The 1990s and early 2000s seemed to be a period when many large organizations were implementing diversity initiatives with an increased focus on increasing awareness of racism and sexism and improving the representation of minority persons in management positions above entry levels. Since 2010, the last two decades, racism and sexism have presented more subtly. Microaggressions associated with race and gender were well represented in the study data. Participant 6 related an example of racism she experienced in the earlier decades:

We were all together at lunch, about six of us from my department. Everybody was white, of course, except me. These were the days when there were not many Black leaders. You did not have many people of color around in the bank anywhere. A Black woman walked by and a man in our group said, "Look what we hire. We used to hire White people; I do not get it. Blacks multiply like rats and then expect help." I was blown away . . . I went to the bathroom, and I cried. I could not believe that someone was speaking that way in a work environment in front of other people, and me, a Black woman. I was completely blown away. No one, and I mean no one objected. Not a single person said anything about it.

Participant 4 described an experience of being proposed for a crucible assignment as a first and/or only—and the racial overtones in the decision process:

The company existed for over two hundred years with no Black representation at highest levels. There was a vice chairperson pushing for me to be in an organization where they had two Black male executive vice presidents previously. One Black man was responsible for charitable endeavors. That was easy for leadership because they did not have to put him in front of clients. My position was running global operations. I had to recruit clients. It was with great trepidation, for leadership and me to place me in this position. Leadership was curious if the clients would plan to pull their accounts. I thought

the leadership was racist, not openly racist, but afraid to put a Black face in from of big money clients, multimillion dollar contracts. I understood their pain. I knew this was difficult. There I was, five feet tall and a Black woman with career goals. This was a tricky situation for all involved. I would have been easier for me, leadership, and the customers to have a six-foot White man in the position that could immediately connect and drink beer in the backyard with the big dollar (White) clients.

Participant 17 shared an experience of racist behaviors that occurred while traveling on a business trip on a corporate plane:

One of their customers supplied a private plane to travel to the facility that made fabrics, a garment manufacturing company. The people traveling were mostly older Jewish men. The racial epithets and the sexual jokes on that plane were pervasive. I had nowhere to go, this was not a commercial flight but a small private plane. The exposure was for several hours as we were flying . . . it was annoying.

Recognizing Her Career Is Off-Track

There is a lot of space between a career excelling and being fired. There are points when signals are sent, and often a different point when the signals are received that the career advancement process is off track. Participants told of their experience of receiving these signals and processing them over time.

I coined this term, professional paranoia. I describe it as when you go to work, and you know that the inner team is talking about something about you. You feel the need to behave higher than high. As a famous Black woman once said, when they go low, you go high. I did not want to go high, I wanted to go low. I wanted to be just as petty as they were, but I could not because of my branding and my integrity. It was extremely uncomfortable . . . I knew that the work that I was doing was being sabotaged . . . It later became known that the employees were coached not to come to me. They were told to not go to human resources, that they could not trust human resources. Following an internal investigation, it was revealed why it was difficult for me to be successful. (Participant 6)

Participant 2 described an experience of realizing she was being pushed out and why:

We were in in an organization redesign and positions were being eliminated. I was not aware of the relationships I needed to have, I was not as clued in. I thought that I needed to make the decision to leave on my own. They were looking to reduce leaders . . . That was the first time I felt like I almost got pushed out of that assignment. There was a Black vice president, a woman, who had responsibility for coaching me and my group. I would meet with her . . . she said, you are doing great work, but let me be clear, they're looking to reduce headcount, and you need to be prepared. I had never had that experience before

. . . That was the first time. I thought, "hey should love me, I do everything I can, I am working hard, I am losing sleep, I am choosing not to do other things I want to do." This was the first time I realized the importance of political connections, the importance of making sure you have the right relationships.

Overview of Critical Incident Type Analysis Results

The interview incident type data achieved saturation at 68 incidents. Twelve more incidents were collected to confirm saturation for a of total 80 incidents for the study. There were two incidents shared that did not align with the five identified themes. The first was being member of an organization involved in a corporate downsizing or restructuring project. This is a situation well documented in the literature (e.g., Buford, 1997) but was not frequently identified in my study as being the most impactful by the participants. The second was being assigned work that is consistent with being at a higher level in the organization. This was mentioned a few times and perceived differently by each participant. One participant viewed it as taking advantage to use her skills without the compensation, while another saw it as encouraging that she was seen as able to contribute at that level. A third saw the situation as an indication that a promotion was likely. On the other hand, building and maintaining critical relationships, or not, was interwoven throughout nearly all 80 incidents shared in one way or another. It was considered as an overarching theme but was not included because of the number of types of relationships involved and because there was not a single dominant critical relationship amongst them. Critical relationships strongly influenced the incident outcome experienced by the participants.

Critical Incident Outcomes

There were over 200 outcome descriptor codes that formed over 20 categories and five dominant themes:

- gaining new skills, insights, and experiences

- being promoted, pay increases, and new professional connections

- experiencing stronger and different feelings about work

- experiencing health concerns or issues

- experiencing negative consequences that limit future career advancement.

These themes will now be discussed in more detail.

Gaining New Skills, Insights, and Experiences

The most frequently occurring outcome reported from the most impactful career advancement incidents was gaining new skills, insights, and experiences. The type of skills obtained included both hard skills and soft skills. The insights gained were wide ranging. The new experiences were wide ranging as well, new types of work, new geographies, new companies, and new home community and company cultures.

Participant 18 related an experience of skill acquisition:

> They placed me in a position focused on a smaller task to assess my organizational skills, and my ability to lead . . . before I was offered to the bigger position. All the skills that I learned and used in the smaller position were skills that were absolutely needed in the bigger job.

Participant 5 talked about being asked to present to the board of directors for the first time and creating a presentation that did not meet expectations. She was fortunate to have a boss that coached her through it. Later she coached many others on this same skill.

> He told me that he wanted me to oversee the presentation to the board. I had attended our board meetings, but I had never been responsible for presenting materials other than governance materials . . . In hindsight, I have mastered this now, but then, I started by writing this really long memo of all the things that were going wrong with the relationship with the client. I identified the key issues, how we needed to fix them, and blah, blah, blah. I sent that to him. He said, no, no, no, no, no. We are not going to send the board a memo . . . He basically said, we need to start over. (Participant 5)

Participant 5's boss was committed to her growth and success and was willing to spend significant time over several days helping her prepare for the board meeting that was imminent. Many of the critical incidents involving work the boss had assessed as substandard ended differently—in negative consequences that impacted the potential for future career advancement.

The participants gained insights including new ways of thinking about themselves, others, and things. The new insights served to guide them in their future careers and strengthened the foundation for their coaching of others. The insights from incidents that hindered their advancement appeared as valuable as the ones gained from experiences that helped their careers. A supportive manager of Participant 3 asked her, "when are you going to declare yourself great?" Participant 3 responded with the following about this interaction:

> These two conversations changed my life, they empowered me more than ever. From that point on, I knew I was great. I did not have to prove it, I just needed to be in a place where I could flourish. If my immediate manager did not appreciate me, fine, I will go do something else, either with that company, or with another company. I never questioned my value or my competence after that. I was not afraid to leave a company after that conversation. I had bad bosses, but a bad boss no longer defined my success.

> Participant 6 gained valuable insights about having a holistic support network:

> I was very intentional about the different support systems that I wanted in my space… they were very beneficial and helped me to process the different things that I was experiencing professionally, personally, and mentally. The mental stuff can play with you. They helped me with what I was trying to accomplish, and what I needed to do to protect myself legally and professionally.

> Participant 7 created a small book of insights; she called it her "little black book." She

explained: "I continued to excel in my performance, but also with my image and my exposure . . . I had a little black book I kept on the side of my bench. I would write down unwritten rules" (Participant 7). The acquisition of skills, insights, and experiences as an outcome of a critical incident often served to increase marketability and the opportunity for increased pay and promotion.

Being Promoted, Pay Increases, and New Professional Connections

Promotion and pay increases are the obvious outcomes expected for everyone who achieves executive levels in large corporations. Participants in this study received many promotions and pay increases. Participant 14 referred to herself as a "seven-figure girl," referencing her seven-figure compensation package. Participant 20 noted that previously her professional connections included personal relationships with the next CEO prior to his appointment. Participant 10 revealed her successful strategy to attain frequent promotions:

> It worked to get to really know my vice president at the time and to request to take things off her plate of responsibilities . . . When I could see that she was spread too thin in my opinion. She could have said everything was fine, but she did not. She said, you are right, I do have too much on my plate. That just worked for both of us, and it allowed me to continue to learn. Every two to four years, I was promoted to a higher level which was what I wanted.

Experiencing Stronger and Different Feelings About Work

Career advancement in these large corporations produced much more than the elevation to executive levels and big compensation packages. Many of the participants experienced different or stronger feelings about their work as they advanced. The participants expressed a range of feelings including empowerment, pride, joy, hope, disgust, disappointment, hurt, loneliness, surprise, and many derivatives of these as illustrated in many of the examples previously shared. An experienced human resource executive described the hurt she experienced following an experience of racist behaviors.

> I felt like I someone had stabbed me. When I went home that day I was a mess, I was crying. My husband asked what happened. I told him it hurt to hear those words. It really, really hurt me deeply to hear those words in front of other people. It would hurt me anyway, but it in front of those people, I felt very demeaned. (Participant 4)

Participant 1 shared what was an unexpected emotional response to her after being promoted. She questioned her performance and a lessening of her self-confidence.

I was promoted. Within my first year and second years at level, I felt very unstable. I thought, they are probably wondering why the promoted me. I thought I am not doing a decent job. There was no one saying that I was not performing well, but I had a deep feeling that I was not performing well. (Participant 1)

Experiencing Health Concerns or Issues

Several participants shared experiencing physical health issues such as cardiac issues, cancer, and the dreaded stomach issues. Neither they nor their doctors could tie their health issues directly to their work experiences, yet all expressed a belief that the trauma from work was a contributor. Participant 6 offered a glimpse into the challenge to maintain her mental health. Mental health concerns were mentioned as frequently if not more frequently than physical health concerns:

> I did a lot to protect myself in that space. I decided I would not carry that hurt and workplace trauma to another organization. I felt that carrying that baggage to a new setting would be more damning and damaging than helpful. I had my personal coach and my professional coach, I had my mental health coach that helped me over the last three years to process everything that has happened in this space professionally, as well as personal stuff external to work. I did not want to turn into that angry Black woman to be seen by everyone. I did not want to be that person. (Participant 6)

A participant found herself in a toxic work relationship that caused her to lose sight of who she was.

> It was toxic to the point where I was having dreams of … (doing terrible things to this person). I was having dreams; I would wake up and I would have hurt her. I thought, this is not healthy. That's when I reached out to some mentors about transferring functions because I just did not want to in that place emotionally. I did not know who I was anymore. (Participant 11)

Another participant shared her observations of health-related issues, mental and physical, about others and herself.

> I saw so many people be diagnosed with health issues but continue to pound themselves at work. It did not seem to wake them up. I used to travel a lot. I was always on a plane going somewhere. I had two young kids. My stress was really worrying about who was going to pick them up. I was not worried about them being in danger, because I had the benefit of living in a decent area and having friends and family that helped us out. But the high amount of travel and too often experiencing drunk white men drunk leaning into me

on the plane made me question what I was doing and what I should be doing. (Participant 17)

Health concerns or issues were not the only negative outcomes of the career advancement process for these Black women leaders on the executive track. Some of the other negative outcomes are shared in the next section.

Experiencing Negative Consequences That Limit Future Career Advancement

Negative outcomes from the most impactful career advancement incidents were real, despite the optimistic spin many of the participants attached to them. The participants shared experiences of losing key advocates, being pushed to the side while not being fired, being fired, and possibly some of the most damaging was the loss of trust, respect, as well as bouts with mental and physical health discussed above. An example of loss of job has been shared previously. Below are segments from different interviews addressing loss of respect, loss of trust, and the loss of income by choosing to retire early to stop the unhealthy experiences. More than a few of the participants reported retiring early, prior to 58, for health reasons. Participant 20 described the experience of the loss of trust and respect.

> I found out the hard way that I was not treated badly, but things that I had taken for granted, I could no longer take for granted. Literally, that was why I retired early, I was used to having a certain level of trust and respect by my management, and it was gone when the new leadership took over. (Participant 20)

A participant described the painful decision to take legal action against an employer of many years. She was not the only one to do so. It was the choice of last resort to take care of their families as primary income earners which many of these women were.

> I was not the only one that it happened to and I had to move on. I had to provide for my family, I had to do what I did, I had to take legal action as a result how I was treated . . . I had to get what was rightfully mine. I was able to get my retirement which I should have been offered anyway and I was financially compensated in addition to that. (Participant 3)

The themes of outcomes of the career advancement incidents identified by the participants as most impactful summarized the data in the interviews. Many left long lasting effects on the participants. They provided learning in the moment and ongoing. In some cases, they were important content for coaching others.

Summary of the Research Findings

This study sought to identify the most impactful career advancement incidents for Black women executives in large, American, primarily White, companies on their journey to achieve executive levels. And the related themes. The CIT methodology was used to analyze 80 separate incidents obtained from 20 participants who had collective work experience with 29 Fortune 1000 corporations. Figure 4.2 is a visual representation of the overall study results and findings.

Figure 4.2

The Black Woman Leader Experience of Career Advancement to Executive Levels in Large American Companies

Exploring the Career Advancement Experience of Black Women on their Journey to Executive Level in Large Companies

OVERARCHING THEMES

THE EXPERIENCE OF BEING THE FIRST AND/OR THE ONLY:
- Having her qualifications or credibility questioned
- Feeling isolated, invisible, and unwelcome
- Being aware that she is different from the others
- Feeling unsupported at work
- Experiencing racism and, or sexism
- Looking up and over and not seeing people like her
- Feeling empowered, accomplished, proud, hopeful, lonely, disappointed, or frustrated

SUSTAINING BELIEFS
- Having a strong faith or spirituality
- Having a strong sense of self-worth
- Believing Black people and women should support each other

Black Women in Leadership

BEING THE FIRST AND/OR ONLY

15+ Years of Management Experience

Executives in Fortune 1000 Companies

SUSTAINING BELIEFS

CRITICAL INCIDENTS

Antecedents

Incidents   Outcomes

CRITICAL INCIDENT THEMES

ANTECEDENTS
- Being the first and/or only
- Having a strong faith or spirituality
- Being new in an organization, type of work, level, or position
- Experiencing strong support
- Feeling unsupported at work

INCIDENTS
- Building, maintaining, and leveraging critical relationships
- Broadening skills, insights, and experiences at level
- Leaving the company by choice or being forced out
- Experiencing racism and/or sexism
- Recognizing her career is off-track

OUTCOMES
- Gaining new skills, insights, and experiences
- Being promoted, pay increases, and new professional connections
- Experiencing stronger and different feelings about work
- Being more supportive of Black and women leaders
- Experiencing health concerns or issues
- Experiencing negative consequences that limit future career advancement

Data Theme Summary

The incidents the participants identified as most impactful, described personal and professional experiences and their impact in the moment and upon reflection. There were two types of themes: overarching themes and the themes that emerged from the critical incident antecedents, incident type, and the outcomes. There were two overarching themes across all participants and the end-to-end experience of critical career advancement incidents. The three critical incident sub-parts—the antecedents, the incident type, and the incident outcome—each had five themes that described the sub-incident part.

The emergent coding process of the interview data revealed two overarching themes that permeated the critical incidents end-to-end. The most dominant theme in the study, an overarching theme, was being the first and/or the only Black, woman, or Black woman. Examples included being the first and/or the only at a level in a function, in a work group, or in a specific job. The status of being the first and/or the only was described as a frequently occurring context for the most impactful incidents. Many of the participants shared that they experienced being the first and/or the only in their personal lives prior to the journey to achieve executive levels in Fortune 1000 corporations.

The second overarching theme was sustaining beliefs. The interviews identified that most participants shared common beliefs that they believed sustained them on their journey of career advancement, enabling them to remain resilient, hopeful, and at peace with themselves and others. Several of the antecedents, incidents, and outcomes data categories that produced the themes were duplicated across more than one CIT incident sub-part, creating the overlap in the Venn diagram portion of the model illustrating the findings. Critical relationships emerged as a large area of overlap across the three incident sub-parts. However, it did not rise to the level of

the overarching themes. The critical relationships frequently identified were bosses, mentors, advocates, and individuals and groups that shared a social sub-group identity such as being a Black person or a woman. The most important concepts that emerge from a holistic review of the themes will be interpreted in the next chapter.

Conclusion to Chapter IV

The experience of being the first and/or the only Black person, woman, or Black woman superseded all other themes identified in the study. The theme was present in all interviews. The second overarching theme, sustaining beliefs, was described by the participants as being essential to their resiliency on their successful career advancement journeys. The two overarching themes played a significant role that provided context for the most impactful critical incidents. They influenced the themes for the antecedents, incidents, and outcomes. The next chapter will identify the key findings, interpret them, and share conclusions and recommendations for Black women leaders, their advocates, their company leadership, and leaders in the field of diversity, equity, and inclusion, as well as future research.

CHAPTER V: KEY INSIGHTS, DISCUSSION, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Overview of the Research

Study Background and Overview

The problem in practice that inspired this study is that Black women remain significantly underrepresented in executive-level positions in large corporations in America nearly 60 years after the passage of the Civil Rights Act (1964). The career advancement experience of Black women executives was of great personal interest to me because I spent nearly 20 years as an executive in a large corporation. Much of the literature on Black women leaders focused on the overall experience, barriers, and success strategies for advancement. This study sought to identify the moments or events that were the most impactful in helping or hindering career advancement to the executive level in large American corporations with primarily White leadership. A qualitative methodology, the critical incident technique (CIT), was used for the study. The data was collected in interviews over zoom, transcribed, redacted, and analyzed thru an interpretative-constructivist lens. The data was analyzed consistent with traditional CIT methodology by antecedents, the actual incidents, and the outcomes.

Significance of the Study

The study is significant because it adds to understanding a long-standing problem, insufficient career advancement of Black women to executive-level positions in large American companies. An additional aspect of significance is that, to my knowledge, CIT has not been used to investigate the career advancement experience of Black executive leaders, thus providing an opportunity for new learning.

Scope of the Study/Study Limitations

The study was inspired by the long-standing underrepresentation of Black women at executive levels. Boundaries that framed the study include the interpretation of the role of the researcher, the participant criteria, the methodology, and the research questions. These elements were described in detail in Chapter III. The focus of the study was the most impactful moments, events, or in the terminology of the CIT methodology, incidents in the career advancement experience of Black women leaders that achieved executive levels in large American companies. The study explored incidents that helped and hindered career advancement.

There were several boundaries that further limited the scope of this study. The participant criteria were Black women that achieved an executive level in large corporations, as defined by Fortune 1000, with a minimum of 15 years of management experience and no active relationship with the researcher in the past 15 years. The choice to have participants determine which events in their career were most impactful was made to maximize the possibility of inclusion of the events assessed as most impactful by the participant's perspective. The choice to allow incidents from the entire career of the participants was made to allow flexibility for the participants to select the most impactful events over their entire management career. The criterion that the participant could not have been involved in an active relationship with me for the past 15 years was to minimize concerns of sharing uncomfortable information in the context of a recent relationship. The above boundaries framed the study that produced the findings and recommendations and the reflective insights shared in the following sections.

Participant Demographics

There were 20 participants in the study from 29 Fortune 1000 companies. Purposeful sampling was used for participant recruitment. There were four participant criteria. The criteria

were self-identification as a Black (of African descent) woman, to have worked a minimum of 15 years as a manager in a Fortune 1000 corporation, to have achieved an executive level in a Fortune 1000 corporation, and to have no active relationship with me in the past 15 years. The participant group was characterized as women over 50 years old (85%) who did not earn an undergraduate degree from a historically Black college or university (70%), with 20–30 years of management work experience (60%), whose primary sector of management experience was consumer packaged goods (50%), with primary functional expertise in supply chain management (40%), human resources (20%), and sales and marketing (20%), and, also who worked for only one Fortune 1000 company during their career (45%). Most of the participants (95%) worked for non-Fortune 1000 employers in management positions during their careers. The management careers of the participants in this study spanned five decades, the 1980s through 2022.

Summary of the Research Findings and Results

The primary research question was this: What were the most impactful events Black women leaders at large American corporations experienced on their career journey to the executive level? Consistent with the CIT methodology, themes were identified from the antecedents, incidents type, and the outcomes. Two concepts dominated the entire data set and were identified as overarching themes: the experience of being the first and/or the only and the existence of sustaining beliefs shared by an overwhelming number of the participants.

Figure 5.1 summarizes the overall research findings and the most critical recommendations for Black women leaders, company leadership, and diversity, equity, and inclusion professionals.

Figure 5.1

Summary of the Findings: The Career Advancement Experience of Black Women Leaders Who Achieved Executive Level in Fortune 1000 Companies

Recommendation for ALL: Become familiar with the Black Woman leadership experience

For Black Women (BW) Leaders:

- Attract and retain high quality mentors and sponsors
- Ensure sufficient mechanisms for coping and meaning making
- Test feedback for transparency and accuracy
- Tell your story in safe environments to help yourself and others

For Company Leadership:

- Be strategic and intentional to increase representation of BW
- Create relationships with BW characterized by trust, transparency, and respect
- Be intentional in selecting bosses and sponsors for BW
- Ensure BW are included in leadership development programming

For Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Resources:

- Cease discussing women and Black leaders as a monotonous group
- Distinguish and share the similarities and differences in the leadership experience of BW from others
- Provide content and coaching on the unique challenges and success strategies of BW

Conclusions:

- Being the first and/or only has a major impact on the BW career advancement experience
- The number of first and/or only experiences in corporate America are still increasing for BW
- Being in a 'new' work situation compounds the status of 'other' and 'outsider' for BW
- The experience of BW leaders requires intentional actions by the women and their leadership to support their coping and meaning making
- BW leaders telling their stories in safe environments helps them and others

The overarching themes fueled each other, permeated the critical incidents, and were later condensed to create five key findings. I have identified for each of the five key findings practical implications and recommendations that are consistent with the research experience.

Key Findings: Discussion and Practical Implications

Overview

The long-standing problem of insufficient career advancement of Black women to executive-level positions in large, primarily White, American companies was the frame of reference for identification of the most important insights from the overall research findings and results. The identification of these key insights was based on their strength in influencing the overall findings and emerging concepts were prioritized over those that saturated the literature. Five insights were identified based on those criteria. The five key insights were as follows:

1. All participants experienced being the first and/or the only multiple times, and this had an important impact on their career advancement experience.

2. Having a strong faith or spirituality was an important mechanism for coping and meaning-making in the career advancement journey.

3. Developing and maintaining cross-race critical relationships with the boss, mentors, and sponsors were essential to career advancement.

4. Individuals and group relationships with Black leaders and women leaders remain important to making sense of the career advancement experience, developing essential skills, understanding the unwritten rules, and maintenance of mental and physical health.

5. Being new in an organization, new to a type of work, new at a level in the organization, or new in a geography was frequently associated with the most

impactful career advancement events. The remainder of this chapter will discuss these key insights, link them to the literature, identify the practical implications, and recommendations.

Key Finding #1: The Importance of the Experience of Being the First and/or the Only

All the participants experienced being the first and/or the only multiple times during their career advancement experience. These experiences highlighted their intersectionality of being both a Black person and female simultaneously. Being a Black person and a woman in leadership positions placed these women in a situation where they were seen as outsiders and not consistent with the traditional expectations of what leaders look like. Both expectation states theory (Berger & Fisek, 1974) and leadership categorization theory (Lord et al., 1982) support that Black women would be unlikely to be granted the privileges that come with leadership. The interviews provided the evidence that the experiences of being first and/or only were important to their overall career advancement and often contributed to or were their most impactful career advancement incidents.

Lean In (2020) reported that the "only" experience was far too common for Black women. They described the experience to be that of feeling left out, watched more closely than others, feeling on guard or constantly being on the defense, feeling fortunate to have the job, feeling as if their actions reflect on all who look like her, and an intense pressure to perform. Catalyst (2004) reported that many African American women within one-to-three levels of the CEO position creatively protect their privacy while meeting the organization expectation to share and be open. Being the first and/or the only was not new to the women in the study when they joined corporate America. Many of the women experienced being the first and/or only prior to beginning their careers in academic pursuits, sporting activities, and in other areas. This key

finding is discussed at greater length than the others due to its dominance in and impact on the

overall findings.

Participant 19 shared an experience of being the first and/or the only prior to joining a

corporation, a racist taunt that occurred at her Ivy League university:

> Growing up, I had always been the only Black person in a class. At university, something
> happened that really changed my life. It changed who I was . . . I remember doing a
> difficult differential equation on the chalkboard and the writing chalk squealed on the
> chalkboard. I kept writing and the professor said, scientists have discovered why certain
> populations, he did his fingers like in quotations, react to that sound . . . And he said, it
> goes back to the wild. When a monkey is in trouble, he will shriek at a certain decibel to
> let all the other monkeys in the jungle know that there is danger . . . I asked what he
> meant by certain populations. He responded by saying Black people. He shared his belief
> that Black people evolved from apes and white people came from Adam and Eve . . . The
> entire class was giggling . . . I was the only Black person in the class of 300 people.
> (Participant 19)

This excerpt from Participant 19 reveals some of the worst negative stereotyping

associated with Black people. Scholars have found that stereotypes of Black women were

overwhelmingly negative, while those of White males were overwhelmingly positive

(Reynolds-Dobbs et al., 2008; Rosette et al., 2018). Participant 3 spoke of an early experience as

the only African American woman manager at a work location early in her career. She initially

had low trust in most people that were not of her race and, as a result, was "on guard" much of

her time at work. She had a mentor relationship with a Black male manager that helped her to

adjust to her initial distrust of White people at work and ultimately, she was able to reduce her

everyday tension.

> He gave me the license to trust others, instead of doubting them automatically. As a new
> African American female in the organization, and at that time, the only African American
> female manager in that location, I did not know who to trust. He explained to me that it
> was okay to trust people if they show up trustworthy, and if they do not, then you can
> confront the situation from there. (Participant 3)

Participant 13 reported being the first, and the only Black woman in a work location at a

senior level:

> It was a big promotion. There were no Black women in roles of that level, there was one
> woman before me, she was a White woman . . . But no African American women at all at
> that level. There were plenty at the first level, at the entry levels, of course, plenty at the
> hourly levels. But to have a Black woman at that level, at that time was a big deal. I was
> the first African American woman at that level and in that type of job at that site.
> (Participant 13)

For many participants, the experience of being the first and/or only recalled an array of

emotions and experiences associated with past situations as well as the emotions associated with

the experience at the moment. A. N. Smith et al. (2019) described the experience of many

executive Black women as being an "outsider within . . . in which they simultaneously

experience opportunities and constraints associated with two forms of intersectional invisibility:

benign and hostile" (p. 1). They argued that this paradoxical status is more impactful on their

career advancement than levels of education, income, and occupational status. As a result, Black

women do not fit neatly into the most widespread race or gender stereotypes widespread within

their organizations; they are strangers amongst their mostly White male peers. They are double

outsiders; they are neither White nor male. A. N. Smith et al. concluded, "They are living in two

worlds but never really at home in either" (p. 3). Black women who achieved this differentiating

status in education, finances, work, lifestyle, and privileges do not always feel they fit or belong

in their communities of origin, an additional dimension of outsider status. Their experiences are

different; their lifestyle is different, and they are different. They receive reminders of how

different they are everywhere, at work, at home, in their communities, and many other places. A.

N. Smith et al. discussed the contradictory nature of being Black and female in an executive

position as simultaneously being invisible, isolated, ignored, talked over, or passed over, while

also being hyper-visible because of her physical traits. The invisibility is in the media, in retail,

with the exhaustion of looking for products designed for your hair or skin tone, and the

exacerbation of looking over and up in the organization whose leaders do look like her.

Participant 5 talked about being the first and/only being considered for a CEO role and her

perspective on why representation at executive levels matters for Black women.

> I do not think I ever saw myself advancing to a level that high because there was no one who looked like me there. I was the first woman managing partner of the office. I was the first Black woman managing partner the office. I had no women partners ahead of me in my practice group at that firm… At the previous firm, there were two or three White women, and they did not have children, I did not have a lot in common with them. Therefore, I never saw it as something that would be attainable, and I think therefore I feel very strongly that representation matters so much. People need to see themselves in the leadership to believe that they can achieve, and that they are not somehow an exception. I love responding when people say I am exceptional. No, I'm not. There's a lot of Black women out there, you just have not recognized them, and they are absolutely capable of thriving in the highest roles possible in organizations.

Catalyst (2004) reported that Black women leaders are more visible than other employees

and that their actions come under greater scrutiny. Being a Black woman served to accentuate

her visibility further. Participant 11 described her experience of being an only and the impact it

had on her. She was in a critical role for the organization that by nature that was highly visible.

> I had gotten to a place in my career where I decided it was not worth this. It was a high-pressure job. It was the role, but it was also being a Black woman in the role in that function, particularly in that function which was 98% white men, and I worked in the oldest business group. When you talk about a good ole boy system, I was in the thick of it in an extremely critical role. I felt like I was in the fishbowl for so many reasons. It was fishbowl because I was the only one there; there were a few other Black women scattered across, but nobody else in my area. Being in a fishbowl, from a visibility standpoint, but also for the role I was in. I remember that I got response of, she's articulate, This was stuff that I thought you only read about, but no, it really did happen to me. (Participant 11)

Dnika et al. (2016) argued that there is an emotional tax for Black women leaders caused

by the repeated experience of unrealistic expectations, isolation, being undervalued, and

microaggressions. They reported the result of the emotional tax as feeling the need to be "on

guard," the disruption of sleep, and a reduction of "psychological safety" inhibiting ability to

contribute at work. Lean In (2020) reported Black women in corporate leadership experienced a wider range of microaggressions than all others. They often have their competence questioned or are disrespected. Catalyst (2004) stated that 32% of African American women surveyed in their study reported that White colleagues perceive them as under-qualified, at a much higher rate than Latinas and Asian women. While microaggressions are sometimes unintentional and seem insignificant to some (Adams & Lott, 2019; Sue & Spanierman, 2020), they can be experienced as death by a thousand papercuts, a slow painful demise caused by seemingly insignificant individual actions.

The participants also discussed the extra work that came with being a first and/or an only and of an intersectional social group status that is not required of their White counterparts. Additional network meetings are common for Black and female leaders, including leadership and coaching of diversity networks, and a disproportionate number of Black female mentees and sponsorees. To be clear, the participants reported immense joy from these experiences; however, it was an add-on to their other business deliverables that were required to have an opportunity to be evaluated on a somewhat equal playing field with their White counterparts.

The participants repeatedly shared the expectation of others and the expectation of themselves to specifically support other Black women on the leadership journey and Black leaders and women more generally. This surfaced as a key descriptor of one of the overarching themes, sustaining beliefs. The specific belief was that female and Black leaders should support each other. Participants described the work as "extra credit," their second job, or community service. They expressed the importance of the extra work knowing full well that it would not likely contribute to their performance assessment or career advancement but would probably contribute to that of another that looked like them in some way. This work often occurred off

stage from the visible work of all leaders contributing to another dimension of invisibility. The

Black women leaders who rose to executive levels often worked behind the scenes to lift others

as they climbed the corporate ranks. They felt the burden was often disproportionate because

there were so few of them at executive level and those needing the support expressed a

preference and increased trust for working and for learning from someone that looked more like

themselves. This was in addition to feeling as if they carried the weight of representing on a

more visible stage all that looked like them. Several participants discussed the additional stress

related to this. It was a burden and a burden they happily carried. Participant 11 described her

experience:

> Very often Black woman executives are called upon to represent. They need a person of color and there is only one. You sit on panels because you are the only one. I mentored nearly 30 people because I was the only one. There are so many things you do because you are the only one. When I left the company, I realized the burden I had been carrying for so long. It is just such an overarching thing, living that 'only-ism'. For longtime I never got to celebrate that I had another at my level with me . . . and it was a horrible experience because I connected to folks, certainly outside my function; otherwise, I would not have survived. (Participant 11)

Grimes (2002) highlighted the luxury that White leaders enjoy of seeing themselves as

individuals versus the experience of many Black leaders, carrying the load of being asked to

intentionally represent an entire race or the unintentional judgment of an entire race based on the

behavior of one or a small group. Purushothaman (2022) wrote *The First, The Few, the Only*

about women of color, highlighting the unique experiences of social sub-groupings. She

described the experience of being the first, among the few, or the only as financially and

emotionally rewarding while ignoring your body until it has a full-blown tantrum. The

experience of the big promotions, large compensation increases, and the emotional highs

connected to the experience often were accompanied by physical and emotional distress because

of what was required to attain them. She interviewed 500 women who had had the experience of

being the first, the few, or the only women of color in corporations and reported that two of three had some chronic health condition.

The experience of perceived or real racism, including microaggressions, contributes to physical and mental illnesses (J. M. Gómez, 2015; Nadal et al., 2014). The experience of being the first and/or the only, can be likened to hazardous duty. The existence of so few Black women in Fortune 1000 CEO positions, as C-suite members, and as board members suggests that the experience of being the first and/or the only will increase for some time to come as more of these positions and the pipeline become occupied by more Black women leaders. Catalyst (2022) argued that despite recent progress on Fortune 500 Boards to increase diversity nearly four times since 2010, it would take five decades to achieve diversity representation at forty percent consistent with representation in the population in the United States. It should be noted that Black women generally lag the other intersectional subgroups of color in executive representation in American corporations (R. Thomas et al., 2020).

Practical Implications of the Experience of Being the First and/or the Only

The practical implications of being the first and/or the only are many. The often-repeated experience of being the first and/or the only by many Black women leaders serves to increase the level of everyday trauma experienced from being on guard, feeling invisible, feeling hypervisibility, experiencing racist and sexist behaviors, feeling discredited, feeling isolated, and ultimately, facing an increased probability of health issues, physical and psychological. As a result, there are many implications for the Black women and their leadership. Black women must consider the following strategies and actions:

- place a high level of importance on maintaining both physical and mental health.

- establish a strong support team at work and outside the work environment that include people that look like them and those that do not.

- have influential advocates within their organization.

- pursue professional relationships with influential leaders that are characterized by trust, transparency, and respect.

- maintain professional connections outside their organizations to remain grounded in industry norms and a network for coaching on specific issues including new job opportunities.

- take on the responsibility to represent, be a role model, feel responsible to coach, mentor, and be the sounding board for all Black women.

The practical implication for the leaders in companies with Black women leaders are many. In general, more focus and effort are required to accelerate closing the gap in representation at the executive levels. Leadership seeking to advance Black women leaders must ensure top talent Black women are represented in the top leadership as visible role models, include Black women in leadership and career development programming and make available content that is specific to the challenges that they are likely to face. These include, ensuring top talent Black women have influential advocates, ensuring top that leadership have professional relationships characterized by trust, transparency, and respecting and ensuring that diversity, equity, and inclusion policies are in place, adhered to, and that those that violate these policies are held accountable.

Key Finding #2: Strong Faith or Spirituality as Mechanisms for Sense Making and Coping

African American feminism is based on the beliefs that Black women experience the world differently, assign different significance to the very same challenges experienced by others, and have generated alternative practices and knowledge to survive and thrive (P. H. Collins, 1996; Crenshaw, 1989; hooks, 1981). This study did not capture demographic data on affiliation with any formal religion. Despite this, based on the conversations, I believe most participants had a past or current affiliation with Christianity. Most of the participants actively expressed an intense sense of spirituality. Many also referenced having a strong faith in a power greater than themselves. For this discussion, spirituality is defined as a belief in the sacred nature of life and the manifestation of these beliefs in the sense of connectedness with others. For the women in this study, faith is defined as a strong belief in a higher power. Faith based on a formal religion and spirituality are distinct but overlapping experiences (Mattis, 2002). A person can be spiritual but not religious. Throughout this report, the terms "faith" and "spirituality" are used as it was used by the original speakers.

The study found repeated references to a higher power to help make sense of their experience and cope with the process and the outcomes. I propose that the uniqueness of the career advancement experience for Black women in large corporations requires the ultimate power to make meaning of the experience and sustain them on the challenging journey. The study data revealed that having a strong religious faith or spiritual centering was a key mechanism for coping with career advancement challenges and facilitating meaning-making of a range of experiences, good and bad.

A strong faith in a higher power, or a spiritual centering, appeared to fuel optimism and hope for the participants on their uncertain and uncharted career advancement journeys. McAdoo

(1995) and Neighbors et al. (1998) reported that African American women tend to use prayer as a primary coping mechanism regardless of the level of involvement in organized religion. Mattis (2002) concluded that religion and spirituality helped African American women in meaning-making and coping experiences. Mattis found that the participant's religious perspectives and their spirituality helped them to accept the reality of their circumstances, identify and confront limitations, let issues go or surrender them to a higher power, identify life lessons, recognize their purpose, act in principled ways, achieve growth, and accept knowledge. Participant 10 shared an example describing the role of faith in her career advancement journey. "I give credit to God for the clarity around navigating in situations, situations that were not what I had hoped for." Later in the interview, Participant 10 elaborated further on how her faith helped her to navigate her career journey and cope with different situations:

> The reason I survived in corporate for 22 years, I know, is because I walked with God through all of it. I know a lot of women say things of that nature. I think they know that a lot of things that are more positive happened because of being on a faith walk or just being a person of faith.

Walker (2009) argued that since African American women in leadership are often the only person of color in these predominantly White organizations, they believe they have nowhere to turn but to faith to endure adverse situations. Participant 3 experienced a painful situation that resulted in her leaving her corporation, not by her choice. She described the role she believed her God played in the situation in helping her make sense of an unpleasant situation:

> God brings you through. He brings you through abundantly. That's all I can say. Time will enable it to heal. There was a time I could not talk about this without crying. And so, you just move on. I'm just being blessed and moving on. (Participant 3)

Dym and Hutson (2005) described the role of faith and spirituality for African American women leaders as helping to reveal appropriate actions and responses to confusion, fear, and

uncertainty. Participant 7 described her perspective of God's active role in helping her cope with a difficult work situation and her decision to leave the corporation:

> God told me it was not time to leave. I was angry because I did not want to be there, but I still had to put on the face . . . I decided I was going to be as helpful as I can until my season there was done here. When it was done, it came so quickly, so seamlessly, until I am still in awe…My work there was done, it was complete . . . I thought it was going to be eventful. I thought it was going to be like a parade . . . It was noticeably quiet. That is why I stayed, because God said, this is where I need you to be, and I saw it come true over time.

Practical Implications of Faith or Spirituality

The evidence in this study demonstrated a strong faith or spirituality served the participants well in helping to make sense of their most impactful career advancement events and the process of coping with the many outcomes. All Black women in leadership are not religious, have a strong faith in a higher power, nor may they possess an intense sense of spirituality. The first implication is that they need to ensure they have alternative mechanisms available manage stress. Another implication of this insight is to encourage Black women leaders to continue to gather in small groups to accept the reality of their circumstances, identify and confront limitations, let issues go or surrender their issues to a higher power, identify life lessons, recognize their purpose, act in principled ways, achieve growth, and accept knowledge from each other. May they find ways to help each other heal, grow, and advance.

Key Finding #3: Critical Relationships with Bosses, Mentors, and Sponsors

Trust and respect are essential to having an effective relationship with a boss, mentor, or sponsor (Staples & Webster, 2008). Critical relationships were the most frequently reported incident identified as most impactful in helping or hindering career advancement by the participants. They presented as antecedents and outcomes. The critical relationships discussed most frequently in the interviews were those with the boss, the mentor, the sponsor or advocate, and individuals and groups that shared the sub-group social identity as Black persons or women.

The relationship with the boss was critical because it is difficult to gain support for progression when the boss is not supportive. The role of the mentor was supportive in that it facilitated meaning making of situations and often provided a sense of empathy, caring, guidance, and tough talk when needed. The relationship with an advocate or sponsor was critical because they made the case for career options and ongoing support in the unique spaces where the Black women were being formally assessed or considered for advancement.

The professional and social relationships with individuals who the Black women shared a sub-group social identity with, were critical because the relationships provided professional and personal support from someone who shared their identity status. These relationships provided more credibility to some participants in what was being said, as if it was more relevant and believable to them. In some cases, these persons with shared sub-group social identity told of similar experiences and had contextual background to know what might be confusing, missing, or not understood. Every participant mentioned each of these types of relationships in describing the incidents that were most impactful to their career advancement. This underscores the importance of attracting, building, and maintaining these relationships with bosses, mentors, and advocates. The importance of individuals and group relationships with those with a similar sub-group social identity as Black persons or women is a separate insight. These same social group relationships will be discussed later in the chapter.

The Most Critical Relationship: The Boss

The boss, for the purpose of this discussion, is defined as the person responsible for the supervision, the direction of work, and performance evaluation feedback. Unlike the mentor or the sponsor, the boss is defined by the organizational structure. Several participants reported advantages of building and maintaining a boss relationship that included elements of mentorship

and sponsorship. The participants cited good bosses on balance with bad bosses in the events

reported as having the most impact on their career advancement. The role of the boss is different

from mentor and sponsor in that everyone has at least one, it is not optional, and there is no effort

required to secure one. The boss-employee relationship is critical by nature as the boss is ideally

the source of the most regular feedback in frequency and impactful coaching. The boss also

normally facilitates the assessment of performance which is critical to being considered for

advancement.

I argue the boss is the most critical relationship for these reasons. When a boss is

unwilling to advocate for the employee, this makes it exceedingly difficult for another to

advocate successfully. A weak or dysfunctional boss-employee relationship is generally not

conducive to career advancement. When the boss-employee relationship is strong and

characterized by trust, transparency, and respect, it is more likely that the relationship will extend

to that of a mentor or sponsor. It is important to note that most of the bosses in these large

companies are White and often but not always male. Lean In (2020) reported that Black women

leaders receive less support and advocacy from their managers than the other demographic

groups in companies.

Participant 7 shared an example of intentionally investing in the relationship with her

White female boss despite having experienced work situations that amplified their cultural

differences and strained the relationship. Yet the relationship delivered results beyond her

expectations. The participant and the boss were able to shift what was once a relationship with

ongoing tension to one of active advocacy by the boss that enabled career advancement.

> I felt we had a good relationship. We talked about a lot of things. One of the things that I
> remember her saying to me at one time was about her denial of bias, unconscious bias,
> and racism in the workplace. She told me to not be a victim . . . I felt her views were a
> little different than mine, and she really helped me to understand that people do not care

about all this racial stuff that has gone on. They do not believe that it is still happening. If I was going to move on with her, I needed to never talk about anything like this again…We continued our great relationship, and she became my sponsor and advocate. That was the first time that I was aware of what a sponsor was because I had only had mentors previously. It was the first time I became aware of what a sponsor, advocate could do for your career. That was the first time in my career that I got promoted by going into an interview only for them to see who I was, not like the other interviews where I was grilled and had to repeated prove myself. (Participant 7)

Participant 16 described a situation of having had a good boss who gave her great counsel— not just good counsel—to remain in the organization where she had strong advocacy until she was promoted. Then, this made way for her to do it in a way that was supportive of her family situation. Her boss was a White male. She had recently had a child and was waiting to be promoted when a position became available. She seriously considered taking a different position in the same company in another section while waiting to further build her skills. She, too, was pleasantly surprised by the actions taken by her boss to support her. Her relationship with her boss grew to be boss, mentor, and advocate.

Some people have perceptions of women that have babies when they come back to work, of what they are and are not capable of doing. I was in a split family situation and had lost daycare because they were terrible. Long story short, but my boss asked me to run the end-of-year meeting. I had just lost my babysitter and I was home by myself. I told him I could do it but I do not have a nanny, I would have to be able to do it from home . . . This was before we had work from home as routine, in the 1990s. He told me he did not care where I did the work if I got it done. That was very freeing for me. I got a fax machine, and I did what I needed to do from home with a little baby there. He was very progressive. This boss gave me great counsel. He told me leave my organization during maternity leave, and risk losing my advocacy. I had some good coaches in my career that gave me some great advice, but he was unique; others might not have thought the way he did at that time. (Participant 16)

Participant 16 was intentional in building that relationship with her boss before the above situation and strengthened the relationship by executing the job deliverables in a creative way on a project that was important to him. It would have been easy for either of them to say it was not possible for her to stay in the organization where she had advocacy as she waited for the promotion to happen. The intention to continue to build the relationship was essential for making

the situation work out for both. Participant 5 described the intentional investment with her White

male boss who was newly appointed to the CEO position. She was offered the opportunity to

travel with him overseas to assess a joint venture project that was not meeting expectations. She

reported the investment in the relationship paid dividends repeatedly. She was intentional in

choosing to accept the elevated level of travel to participate in the assessment process and to

continue to invest in the relationship, which resulted in increased advocacy.

> I think anytime you travel with someone, especially on those long-haul trips, and you
> share meals together and traveling together, you bond and build relationships. I am a
> relationship person. I am a big believer in the bonding, having those relationships,
> building the relations, and using those relationships. When things get hard, I want to be
> able to say, you know me, and I know you. This experience gave me a good connection
> to the rest of the c-suite because they could see that the new CEO had faith in me, and
> then they had faith in me too. (Participant 5)

Participant 12 had been coached on the importance of staying connected with her

managers' manager, the skip level boss, for coaching, additional business information, and to

enable advocacy with the broader leadership group. One of their regular meetings had an

unexpected outcome that was shared as one of her most impactful events.

> There was one moment I will never forget with my senior vice president. I was sitting
> down with her because I liked to have skip-level sessions to make the connection and
> understand what was being said about me. I wanted to shape my own narrative, own my
> brand instead of having my manager carry that for me. I learned early on that it was
> important to have these skip-level conversations . . . I sat down with her this time and
> asked her what tips or advice she had for me. I will never forget what she said to me. She
> said that my business partners felt I brought no value, no worth to them, the business, or
> to the organization. As you might imagine, I was floored. I wondered why my business
> partners have never said this to me, or my direct manager . . . I had to contain my
> reaction. I did not want to live into any stereotypes, but at the same time, I was unhinged.
> She asked if that feedback resonated with me. My response to her was no, it does not
> resonate with me, I have never heard this before. This is the first that I have heard this
> from anyone. (Participant 12)

This excerpt suggests there was not a strong relationship with her direct boss

characterized by trust, transparency, and respect. The relationship with the skip-level boss was

one in which there was direct and transparent feedback, as confirmed later when the participant

followed up with her business partners. Several participants noted the phenomena of not receiving direct, non-affirming feedback from their direct managers, or when they did, it was often after much damage was done.

Two takeaways from this excerpt were that skip-level sessions can be helpful in many ways and that Black women need to be aware that their direct manager may not be giving them all the non-affirming, constructive feedback they need to grow. Participant 1 noted a similar situation of not receiving transparent feedback. She realized this only after her career advancement plateaued for seven years. "But I kept seeing other people progress, and I thought, what is going on? I was not progressing. Looking back now, after I was promoted, I'm very clear that I was not getting the coaching or the feedback I needed" (Participant 1).

There are many possible reasons Black women do not receive the direct feedback and coaching they need to develop and advance. The literature affirms what most Americans know from their lived experience, America remains largely segregated in residential communities, and the workplace is the most cross-cultural experience many White Americans experience (Flournoy, 2021; Iorio, 2021). The past 10-plus years since the election of President Barack Obama have elevated awareness to what is a founding belief of critical race theory: racism is endemic to the American way of life. Black Americans who engage in activities outside the home or their immediate community must interface with people who are White and in leadership positions to get even the most routine tasks accomplished in school, arranging for products and services, and interactions with the government. The interactions that Black people have routinely with White people build skills that enable more effective cross-race interactions, which is referred to code-switching or biculturalism. This is extremely helpful for Black leaders in a primarily White work culture (E. L. Bell & Nkomo, 2021; Purushothman, 2021).

Code-switching is the ability to alternate between different presentations of oneself, for example, a voice and approach for the phone, a business interaction, a college roommate conversation, a same-gender conversation, and a family holiday party conversation, for example. Code-switching is broader than language alone, and applies to how people talk, what they talk about, how they dress, and the overall presentation of self. I see code-switch as a transition, and it requires intellectual and emotional energy. It can be draining especially if it is required often. I have heard it compared to the experience of operating in a culture that speaks a language you are casually familiar with but is not your primary language.

Code-switching is not a practice unique to any gender or race; it just presents differently based on the language, behavior, or culture one is switching toward. The practice normally refers to Black people code-switching in relation to the majority White culture. It is not difficult to understand that most White leaders have minimal experience interacting with Black women in leadership positions before the workplace. It is also true that both Black and White leaders have conscious bias, stereotypes of their social group and others, and unconscious bias related to those of their same race and gender, and those of a different race and gender. I propose that the lack of experience in cross-racial relationships by White people, along with existing conscious and unconscious bias, may influence the quality of cross-racial relationships, including cross-racial critical relationships. Randel et al. (2021) suggested that White leaders approached cross-race relationships with a heightened awareness of the racial differences and argued the need for them to invest in overcoming the associated barriers and stereotypes due to the lack of familiarity with non-Whites. The lack of familiarity of most White leaders with Black female professionals combined with the recognition that for over 30 years many organizations have not been

race- or gender-neutral, contribute to the barriers Black women face as they aspire to advancement in large American companies (E. L. Bell & Nkomo, 2001).

Practical Implications of the Boss Relationship

Every Black woman leader has a boss or a direct manager with whom they can intentionally invest in building a stronger relationship. Each leader has a choice to minimize differences and focus on what they have in common and the potential benefits to career advancement in building relationships, as Participant 7 did or intentionally invest in a relationship with a skip-level boss as Participant 12 did or invest in career possibilities by accepting a difficult travel and work schedule with a key leader as Participant 5 did. I propose the Black woman leader needs to take the lead in building and maintaining a strong relationship with the boss. Of course, the boss should do the same. But the Black woman leaders have the most to lose, and that is why I suggest that she make this a priority.

The next section will address the opportunity of building critical relationships with mentors and sponsors. Considering the evidence that feedback that does not affirm current behaviors does not appear to flow freely, I propose Black women leaders need to investigate options in addition to the boss to get this feedback. What is comfortable and works for one may not for another so that experimentation may be the preferred strategy.

Mentor Relationships

McGlowan-Fellows and Thomas (2004) strongly supported the importance of the mentor and the sponsor relationships for all leaders seeking advancement. Other literature also acknowledges the challenge for many Black women leaders to attract, build, and maintain these relationships with White male leaders (E. L. Bell & Nkomo, 2021; Catalyst, 2004; Lean In, 2020; McGlowan-Fellows & Thomas, 2004). The ability to attract, build, and maintain these

critical relationships is essential to advancing Black women to executive positions (R. Thomas et al., 2020). Mentor and sponsor relationships help to circumvent career advancement barriers and compensate for possible missteps and issues. These relationships are especially important for Black women in leadership as the tolerance for missteps and issues is less than that afforded majority member leaders. Participant 7 described the difference between mentors versus sponsors based on her lived experience:

> A mentor is someone that helps you through things that you're going through that they have done. They may have had the same job, or you may have different things you're facing, and they help you through those different things. They can also be someone that you talk to about how you're doing, as well as how you can do better. A sponsor is someone that is in the room that can influence not only your career but other people's careers. They are in the room where you are not, and they have influence to say, and I put my name on the line for this person. They advocate for that person, and other people take their word that this candidate is great, just because they said they are, so a mentor cannot do any of that. Mentors will give you coaching . . . A sponsor might say, I know that she can do this; you should put her there. Where else can we put her? What else is out there? She needs to be in a leadership role. She needs to be at the next level.

Mentor and sponsor relationships were both critical to the career advancement of the women in the study. Mentors often acted as advocates or sponsors. It was rarer for a sponsor to perform the traditional role of mentor, coaching, consoling, and acting as a trusted guide on the journey.

Mentoring plays a critical role in enabling professionals to attain the highest levels of rank and authority in corporations (McGlowan-Fellows & Thomas, 2004). A mentor is a confidant and trusted advisor who provides the mentee with coaching and guidance that facilitates the development personally and professionally of the person being mentored (Bova, 2000). A mentor generally has more life and work experience than the mentee and oftentimes is older, although not always.

Individuals often have more than one mentor. The mentor identity is known to the mentee. The act of mentoring is normally private between the mentor and the mentee (Ragins &

Kram, 2007). The mentor offers a perspective that can be acted upon at the discretion of the

mentee (deVries, 2011). Some mentors are in the position to also advocate for their mentees.

Mentors do not need to work closely with you or in the same company. However, there is an

advantage to having at least one mentor understand the organizational culture of the mentee's

workplace and connections to their leadership. Catalyst (2004) reported that three-quarters of

African Americans report that having a mentor is a key to success. The mentor is focused on

coaching what to do, how to do, or coping with what has happened.

Participant 6 described a mentor discussion focused on personal well-being following a

series of disruptive incidents. The mentor asked how she could help her.

> I did not have an answer. I said, I just cannot breathe. I feel as though I am holding my breath. I felt that at any moment, I was going to explode. I can understand why people go postal. I was holding so much inside; I was afraid that if I let it out that it was not going to be in my best interest personally or professionally. There was just so much that was going on at work. you would not believe what happens to someone at work in human resources. I often thought, this is not supposed to happen, I am not supposed to be going through this, I am human resources, how is this happening to me? (Participant 6)

Mentors are often the last stop before complete breakdown, regrettable behaviors, or

resignation.

Participant 8 described a similar mentor conversation trying to make sense of her work

experience as a first and only Black leader after transferring to a new department. Mentors

contribute to the sense-making and coping processes.

> My last manager became my mentor. I would go to her, and I would just cry sometimes. Oh my God. I would say to her, I think I made the worst mistake ever by going over there. She would say, no, no, you did not She would dust me off and send me back over there. She said you are fine. I would say that my God, they just do not understand me. I would say, I am Black, they just do not understand. She said not to, worry about it. When you need some love, just come back over here. We will give you some love. But I am sending you back over there. Not seeing enough of us being represented makes it harder. (Participant 8)

Participant 10 discussed her experience of a past mentor transforming into a sponsor.

I reported to a woman who was a VP who later became a mentor and then my champion (sponsor). At that time, I did not know what a champion meant because that terminology was new to me at the time . . . I knew that she was a mentor who then started opening doors and taking me to rooms with tables that I probably would not have been able to enter had it not been for her.

Participant 13 described how her mentor, who no longer worked at the same company as her, helped to influence her decision to change companies. Mentors external to one's company provide a valuable opportunity for calibration with the outside world. It is important to maintain connections and critical relationships outside one's company. Several participants shared that this was not something they took advantage of until later in their careers, often initiated by a crisis.

I was involved in fun projects, and I was paid well, at least I thought I was until my mentor told me I did not . . . I was okay until the boss changed. I was fine under the guy that recruited me. When I was moved to the other manager, the one who did not appreciate my thoughts, that was when I was not feeling good, that was at the end of my career there. (Participant 13)

Participant 13 later recounted her experience about a long-term mentor:

One of my mentors who just turned 81, was my mentor at my first company, and one of my best friends. He is my daughter's godfather. We still talk to this day. We all need help along the way, you cannot do it by yourself . . . I needed help. I could not do it solo. [But in my] early career, I thought I could do anything. (Participant 13)

Mentors are about much more than professional progression. Many mentors contribute to personal development and important life decisions.

Participant 18 discussed how she changed her framework for selecting mentors. Having only women and Black leaders as mentors perpetuated her blind spots and biases. If it is argued that diversity is good for business, how can it be other than good for the support team, including mentors?

It led me to believe that there were good people out there who wanted to help, influence, and lift you up. You have to not only be open, but you've got to let them help you. That was interesting. It changed how I selected mentors in the future because from that point on. I realized that the people around me in my life experiences gave me insight into the

African Americans experience. I needed to understand experiences different from mine. Mentors moved from being people that looked like me to people that did not look like me and did not have the same career trajectory. I needed to understand how they got to where they were, but most importantly, the challenges they face while there because sometimes, we tend to think that they just got it, they do not have any challenges. We have our own biases that we bring into decision-making. So that was that. (Participant 18)

Participant 16 shared important insight gained from a mentor based on his insider knowledge from within the company:

> I thought of him as a mentor. I did. He was someone that I could talk to, he was someone that thought I had talent, and he told me that. He said changes are coming, what you see as your leadership will not be there long. He knew enough behind the scenes to give me the advice to say to hold on. I was eternally grateful. I do not know why he picked me out in the early stages, of what you do... I feel lucky for that and the other leaders that reached out to me.… I was contented living on the west coast, I was happy at my job, not necessarily happy with my job, but I was satisfied. I thought somebody else was looking out for me, taking care of me, and that was not the case.

I assert that all effective relationships are two-way in their nature; each person has desired gives and gets. It is important to begin any mentor relationship by honestly sharing the criteria for a successful relationship for both parties. It is generally clearer what the mentor can offer. There are contributions the mentee can provide in the relationship, such as insights into the thoughts, attitudes, and reasoning of younger leaders, coaching on modern technology, or possibly new and different insights on the business. Participant 14 shared how mentoring can be a two-way relationship.

> I had a mentee who worked in finance, and I mentored him. When I shared with him, I was going international with the company. He said let me help get you ready because the international accounting standards are different from the US. I know you're sharp, but International is different, and where you are going is really different. Let me help you brush up on that before you get over there. This was my mentee . . . I came back from the assignment to a huge raise because we took care of business.

Practical Implications of the Mentor Relationship

The challenges of attracting, building, and maintaining strong relationships characterized by trust, transparency, and respect with White men were discussed in the section on bosses. Catalyst (2004) reported more than half of African American women's mentors are also African American. The practical implication is that, despite the difficulty, Black women leaders must take a leadership role in attracting, building, and maintaining mentor relationships with White leaders and other types of leaders. The reason is simple: they already have unique access to power, information, and relationships.

Mentoring relationships can be beneficial to both the mentor and the mentee. The study data confirmed that these relationships evolved naturally most often or often were initiated as a part of a corporate or affinity network program. Several participants shared that Black women leaders must be more intentional in seeing the possibility mentor and sponsor relationships and taking advantage of the opportunities. The historical relationships between White men and Black women in slavery and the resulting sexualized stereotypes of Black women are a barrier for both Black women and White men to form professional relationships (E. L. Bell & Nkomo, 2021). Mentor relationships—different from sponsor relationships—were effectively initiated by the mentor and the mentee. Sponsoring relationships were different in that they are normally initiated by the advocate or sponsor, because of the relationship objective and the power differential. The Black women were often unaware of all the persons that advocated for them. The next section will address sponsor relationships.

Sponsor Relationships

A sponsor is a person whose primary role is to advocate for, influence, and facilitate career moves on behalf of the person being sponsored. The role is also called "advocate."

Sponsors normally occupy positions at levels higher in the organization than the person for whom they advocate (Roy & Gottlieb, 2017). As with mentorship, an individual often has more than one sponsor.

The act of sponsoring is normally not visible to the individual who is being sponsored, who may not be aware of the people who advocate on their behalf.

The crux of sponsorship is that it requires the involvement of others, beyond the sponsor and the person being sponsored. The sponsor process also involves those that the sponsor seeks to influence to support the career progression of the individual being sponsored. The sponsor leverages their personal credibility and personal relationships to advance the career of the person being sponsored (Randel et al., 2021; Roy & Gottlieb, 2017).

An important criterion to attract sponsorship for Black women leaders is their meeting and exceeding business goals. Merit is not the sole contributor to attracting and maintaining influential sponsors. Influential sponsorship is a type of reward that increases the potential for future career advancement. As discussed in the literature review (Chapter II), distribution of rewards based solely on merit is rare; other non-merit factors are often involved. While merit is not the sole factor in obtaining influential sponsorship for Black women, my experience is that Black women leaders are unlikely to obtain an influential sponsor without a history of producing strong results. For Black women, this is the price of even being considered let alone gaining entry. For Black women leaders, there are enough other factors to discourage sponsorship by highly influential White leaders—for example, White males may well be concerned with the optics of having even a working relationship with a Black women given historical racial relationships, stereotypes, and lack of similarities in demographics and shared life experiences.

Once a Black woman obtains an influential sponsor, it is essential that she projects a personal and professional image that does not present a risk to the credibility of the sponsor. Sponsors are attracted to persons for sponsorship for a variety of reasons that are often unknown to the person being sponsored. Obtaining and maintaining influential sponsorship is essential to career advancement to executive levels for all leaders, and it is even more so for Black women leaders in large corporations with primarily White leadership. Influential sponsorship is not optional to progress to the executive levels in large American corporations. Several participants relayed that until they had the experience, they were unclear on the benefits of influential sponsorship versus a mentor or a sponsor who did not have significant credibility, influence, and power in the organization.

After describing an experience with high-level sponsorship, Participant 11 was asked to discuss when she became aware of the difference between higher-level sponsorship and the implications as opposed to advocacy from her immediate manager. Her response was as follows:

> That role put me at a junior executive level. That was when I started to see what was behind the doors because I was not in the room before that… I knew about the room, but I was not invited in the room. It was at that point when I was in the room that I started to understand. I always had mentors but then had a sponsor, and there was a huge distinction, about that time was when I started to learn a lot. (Participant 11)

> Participant 12 described her experience with one of her sponsors:

> This leader, I think, because of his advocacy for me, his ability to raise me up in conversation, and talk about me behind doors that I did not even know existed… He was able to paint a picture of my performance, my success, and my potential to other leaders. They took note. They noticed, I had quite a few leaders across the organization who would approach me requesting to mentor, advocate, or coach me. I had several different mentor-advocates at this organization, and they were all different. I had a white woman, a white man, and a Black man. It was refreshing.

It is expected for a boss to advocate for their direct report. Something is wrong when a boss feels that they cannot or should not advocate for a direct report. If a boss cannot advocate for their employee, it begs the question of why others would risk their credibility to do so. This

goes back to the importance of developing and maintaining a strong relationship with the boss in addition to meeting and exceeding commitments. Participant 11 described transitioning from advocacy from only her manager to advocacy from others.

> The advocacy that I had before was my one-up manager. I can only think of a short period of time where my immediate manager was not some sort of advocate. Throughout my career I had my manager as an advocate, but that's pretty much I had all I had in this role. Subsequent roles afterwards, I had sponsorship which was at the senior most levels of the company. It really did change everything going forward. As a result of my performance in that role, I had multiple sponsors after that.

Participant 5 shared her belief that her investment in building strong relationships was one of the most important drivers of her career advancement success. She gave an example of developing a relationship with a White male who evolved into a strong advocate. What was interesting about this relationship was that there was initially no apparent connection between them beyond the proximity of their offices. She was randomly placed in the office next to him although having no business connection. She was new to the organization and as a result her workload was low. The leader in the office next to hers would routinely request her help on projects he was responsible for. He was impressed by her work ethic and quality. She attributed this outstanding sponsorship to the serendipitous event of office proximity.

> He became a great sponsor and advocate for me. I cannot say that I would have had the success that I had at the firm including joining the executive committee without him. He was a very, extraordinarily strong sponsor. It all began with a serendipitous event: we sat next to each other. Building those relationships over things that you have in common was important. (Participant 5)

This example is important because it demonstrates that it is not always clear who can help, or who is interested in helping the career advancement journey. Fortunately, in the next example, the Black woman knew who was most likely to help her in what was a stressful and potentially career-ending situation. Participant 20 discussed what evolved into a devastating career incident because of her childcare situation as a single parent. She reached out to a mentor

in her company who was able to shift into an advocacy role and make things happen to resolve

the issue and maintain her employment.

> I was devastated. Devastated and a single parent. That night at dinner, everybody was wondering, what was wrong with me. My mentor suggested we go for a walk. I told him the story and he said not to worry. The very next week, I was moved to a job in his organization, working for a man that is still one of my dearest friends today. The issue was that I had a childcare issue that he turned into a performance issue, which was then a risk to be a career-ending issue because I had a childcare issue. (Participant 20)

> Participant 11 spoke of the experience of receiving advocacy from a well-respected

senior executive. It should be noted that the impact of such advocacy is related to the credibility

and power of the person who advocates. There are situations in organizations where leaders

leave the organization, and the ability to advocate for persons in the company is impacted. A

more nuanced situation is when a leader loses credibility, influence, and power in an

organization but physically remains working there. This situation is worse than a sponsor leaving

the organization because the Black woman being sponsored still believes she has a strong

advocate, but the advocate's credibility, power, and influence have been neutralized.

> I am certain that I would not have had some of the roles I did without sponsorship. They wanted me to think about a director level role in marketing. That was supposed to be the carrot, but I was not interested in that. I would not have ever become a part of the conversation if there was not a sponsor in there. I am not saying that the sponsor is a savior. I am saying that for us as Black women when we do not have that, it's nearly impossible to achieve as much or in any particular time frame. (Participant 11)

> The transition from wondering what is said about you in the "room" to hearing what is

actually said is impactful. Participant 15 shared her experience and perspective of being "in the

room" where the career advancement of higher-level leaders was discussed.

> I could sit at the table; I could hear how they would talk about us. If you're not in human resources, you do not hear twenty of those conversations back-to-back. You walk into the room and give your spiel to your people, and then you leave the room. I got to hear repeated conversations about us. Talking of promoting us, or giving us a big assignment, and how the word risk would come up, and it really offended me because I felt like, why are we so risky? We went to the same schools as these other folks; we had the same. What is the thing causing the risk? Because I do not get it, I want you to say it. I think

they were willing to stick their necks out for people they really wanted to advocate for. I just do not see that happening for us as often. And I think it's because there was a lack of familiarity. In terms of who they socialize with. There was always stuff happening on the weekends that you did not know about, get-togethers, like having people come over for dinner, wine, or whatever. (Participant 15)

Participant 16 shared a very important learning from a women's conference that was referenced in Chapter IV. It is worth repeating:

One woman on the panel said the thing that was the most important thing to me. She said, look, all this is well and good. But when they're in the room, the key is, whoever has the most votes wins. And if you do not have the most votes then you do not win, and that was the most poignant statement I had ever heard about this situation of, how you really get promoted. And really, at that point, I saw it was all about how to create an advocacy wheel. You have had people that will be in that same room to advocate for you to win, to have the most votes. So that was, to me, that was one of the biggest turning points in my career, because I always thought I could have my boss, or the previous person that I worked for and knew me, but that did not matter. What mattered was who was making the decision and when it was being made? That was what that women's conference taught me. (Participant 16)

Participant 16 later added about the importance of having people in the room inclined to vote for her by sharing an additional insight from that same women's conference: all votes in the room were not equal.

The other thing that I would say is that there is still a hierarchy of votes. What I mean is that all votes in that meeting do not count the same, the share of voice was not the same. Whomever has the most clout can have a following of people in that room to vote their and hopefully your way. You need to understand who it is that that holds the most clout, the biggest share of voice. That is the other point that I took away from that conference.

My personal experience in the rooms where advancement to executive levels was discussed was consistent with the participant's recollection of the experience in the room. Decisions on who progresses and who does not are based solely on merit, and the decision process is not democratic, where all votes are equal. Participant 16 closed that discussion by saying, "You need always to assess who has the biggest share of voice in the room . . . it could be five other people that could have a different vote, but it did not matter. Everybody got swayed." This suggests Black women leaders need to know who is in the room discussing

advancement decisions, who has the largest share of voice, and when these sessions occur to have an opportunity to influence the meeting participants proactively.

Sponsorship is a high-stakes process where senior leaders bet on junior leaders, offering their personal credibility as a down payment to influence their peers. Sponsors persuasively make a case for the individuals they sponsor. It is critical that sponsors not be surprised by conflicting accurate information about the person for whom they are advocating. The sponsor relationship is like that of a lawyer-client relationship. The sponsor, like the lawyer, must have all the information, even that which is not flattering. Sponsorship relationships are generally more formal than mentor relationships.

Practical Implications of Sponsor Relationships

The most important practical implication for Black women seeking the sponsorship of influential White leaders to facilitate career advancement is to meet and exceed performance expectations consistently. It is also important to minimize or effectively manage any personal or professional situations that would give the appearance of risk to an influential leader. It has been suggested that it was advantageous for the Black women and the White influential sponsors to invest in learning about each other's interest beyond work to build a more holistic relationship, characterized by trust and mutual respect (Catalyst, 2004). Lastly, my personal experience with my sponsors and coaching others with sponsor relationships taught me that bad news must travel faster than good news. A bad news surprise to a sponsor can be a relationship-ending event.

Key Finding #4: Critical Relationships with Women and Black Leaders

Affinity groups and networks have operated in large successful companies for over five decades, the same period this study covers. Xerox launched what by many was recognized as the first Black employee network, the National Black Employees Caucus in 1970 and the Women's

Leadership Caucus a decade later (Douglas, 2008). It is eerily coincidental that Xerox was the first Fortune 1000 company to have a Black woman as CEO in 2009. Other large companies such as Pepsi and Procter and Gamble followed their lead.

These networks function as support groups for the membership, established new professional relationships, facilitated additional training and development, and operated as a catalyst for policy changes within their companies. Attracting, building, and maintaining relationships with women and Black leaders beyond the boss and business partners is optional for Black women leaders yet essential (Combs, 2003; Douglas, 2008). It is essential because access to individuals with the shared worldviews and experiences where they exist can be helpful in meaning-making and the process of coping with routine and significant experiences. These individual relationships can be extremely beneficial with bosses, mentors, advocates, or professional colleagues. It can also be beneficial to engage with groups or networks focused on women or Black leaders.

The group experience is not something that is universally embraced as beneficial for a variety of reasons. The participants reported affinity networks or groups as helpful. However, it should be noted that 85% of the participants were 50 years old or older. It is possible that younger Black leaders may assess the value of affinity groups differently. Catalyst (2004) found that 30% of African American women reported that they often or always attend conferences targeted to their ethnic group, higher than both Asian and Hispanic leaders. All the participants shared examples of individual relationships with women or Black leaders that were impactful for personal and professional development. Most participants also shared examples of relationships with professional networks for women or Black leaders. Not a single participant reported an

unpleasant experience with a network group, although there were several reports of bad experiences with Black managers and White women.

This study found the network groups to be especially helpful with training and development, awareness of unspoken rules, and insider information not shared otherwise. The individual relationships with women and Black leaders often presented as a safe environment for the younger Black leaders to ask questions, validate organizational norms, understand the career advancement process and the compensation system, and inquire about unique experiences. A Black woman leader seeking a promotion is well advised to have several advocates with data on her most current accomplishments and career interests. This requires that Black women seeking advocacy know who is in the room and when they gather to discuss performance and advancement.

Participant 2 recognized and acknowledged the support she received from the Black managers' network for her business group soon after transferring into the group. She also inferred that some in the group took the affinity group for granted. "The company-wide Black manager group experience helped too . . . One of the things I appreciated was the level of Black excellence" (Participant 2). Participant 3 described a critical coaching relationship with her human resource manager, a Black male she considered a mentor early in her career. He informed her that she was going to be offered a position to go on rotating shifts. She had recently started a new assignment that offered her an opportunity to demonstrate skills at the next level without actually being at the next level. She told him that she was not interested in taking a different position at level position with rotating shifts, which were not seen by most as a positive lifestyle choice. He then explained to her an unspoken rule that leaders were not considered for promotion in that location until they completed a rotating shift position. She accepted a rotating shift

position and was the first to be promoted to the next level from her recruitment group. She

shared her perspective on the importance of the source of the information early in her career,

given there were so few Black leaders in management at that time.

> If I did not trust who was coaching me, I would not have believed that they were looking
> out for my best interest. I see it as critical, as a Black female, for me to have had a mentor
> that I could trust as not trying to mess me up, blur the lines, or make excuses. I felt he
> was giving me the real deal to get to the next level. He helped me to see the big picture. I
> needed to do that. (Participant 3)

Participant 3 moved into the new assignment, performed well, and was promoted on fast

timing versus what was the norm in the organization. Being new in an organization, a type of

work, geography, or new to a level as in being promoted was reported as being present in a

substantial portion of the most impactful events or incidents and will be discussed in the section

that follows practical implications.

Practical Implications of Critical Relationships with Women and Black Leaders

Black women leaders in large companies need to assume that they do not know what they

do not know. A practical implication is that individual and group relationships built on trust,

transparency, and respect with women and Black leaders are an excellent opportunity to gain

information on organizational norms, unspoken rules, policies, coaching, feedback, and training

and development.

Key Finding #5: The Impact of Being "New" on Career Advancement Incidents

It is important to begin by defining what it means to be new, which participants reported

as contributing to 25% of their most impactful career advancement incidents. Four types of being

new were reported: being new to an organization, to a type of work, to a level in the

organization, or to the geography.

Moving to a new organization shares many characteristics with moving to a new culture.

Commonly, one assumes that the type of work to be performed is like the previous type. Another

type of being new is changing to a new type of work, for example, from operations to marketing, or engineering to human resources. These are diverse types of work requiring different skills, systems, and processes. This may involve adapting to new work culture. Promotion to the next level is also a new experience that involves exposure to new organization's cultural elements, work norms, and new work expectations. The last type of being new reported was moving to a new geography.

All four types of being new changes are accompanied by many transitions. Adjusting to the new situation involves decoding, adapting, assimilation at some level, and in some cases learning new skills and unspoken norms. Bridges (1986) developed a model for change and transition that explains how this phenomenon of being new may result in a disproportionate number of critical incidents. Bridges asserted that change is a distinct event—one thing stops, and another starts. He claimed that a single change is often accompanied by multiple transitions. He described the transition process as a three-phase psychological process that extends over time. There is the ending of what used to be, accompanied by the requirement to let go. There is a neutral zone that is often experienced as uncertainty, confusion, and disorientation. Lastly, there is the new beginning of what will be the new situation that may involve new cultural elements, including new tasks, policies, procedures, and new expectations.

All four types of new incidents identified in the study involved a change and one or more transitions. Each transition required focus, strategy, and effort, physical, intellectual, and emotional, to navigate the three phases of each transition. Multiple transitions concurrently could increase uncertainty, confusion, and disorientation to a point where career advancement critical incidents are more likely to occur.

An alternative model to make sense of the phenomena of the concept of being new is culture shock. Ward et al. (2020) described culture shock as an experience of crossing cultures that is stimulating, rewarding, stressful, and bewildering. This is similar to the neutral zone in the Bridges (1986) model. Culture shock was defined as when people find themselves in an unfamiliar environment for the first time. Ward et al. maintained that persons experiencing culture shock could experience significant difficulties coping with the situation. They asserted that individuals could become overwhelmed with the "otherness" of the new culture or situation. The process of culture shock, according to Ward et al., involves psychological and social processes in experiencing and adjusting to intercultural contact, learning new skills, stress management, coping with new environments, and adjusting to cultural identities, and facilitating intergroup relationships. An example from the study came from a description by Participant 12: "I was in my new role, in my new company, in a new location."

I call this "the trifecta," as three things were new simultaneously. This is a situation that is not easy for anyone, much less a Black woman leader in a primarily White organization. Being new in a work situation is not unique to being a woman or a Black person. Given the frequency at which being new was associated with the most impactful incidents, it led me to wonder if being new, managing the transitions and stresses associated with the change or handling the cultural shock, is experienced differently when a person is in a position of being a first and/or an only, is viewed as an outsider distinct from being in a new situation, and is possibly a target of negative stereotyping and/or racist and/or sexist behaviors.

Practical Implications of Being New

The practical implication of the experience of being new for Black women leaders, their leadership, mentors, and advocates, is the need to increase awareness of the number of new

dimensions associated with any job change and seek to minimize these to two when possible. As well, there is the need to take proactive steps to help with the many transitions. Additionally, Black women leaders should engage their support team of the boss, mentors, sponsors, and supporters of shared affinity group status for coaching on effective transitions to new situations.

Recommendations Based on the Overall Study Results and Findings

A Review of the Overall Research Findings and Results

This section of this chapter will offer and discuss recommendations, the most critical indicated actions supported by the evidence in the study—as seen through the lens of my positionality and interpretivist-constructivist approach. The study found two overarching themes that characterized the end-to-end critical incident data and five themes for each critical incident sub-part, the antecedent, the incident, and the outcome.

The two overarching themes were the experience of being the first and/or only in a situation and having three sustaining beliefs that were shared by the participants. The sustaining beliefs were having a strong faith or spirituality, having a strong sense of self-worth, and believing female and Black leaders should support each other.

Themes were also inferred from the the antecedent, the incident itself, and the outcomes. Each sub-part had four or five themes. The antecedent sub-themes were:

- being the first and/or the only

- being of strong faith or spirituality

- being new in an organization, type of work, level, or position

- experiencing strong support

- experiencing not having strong support

The incident themes were:

- building, maintaining, and leveraging critical relationships

- broadening skills, insights, and experiences at level

- leaving the company by choice or being forced out

- recognizing one's career is off track

The outcome themes were:

- gaining new skills, insights, and experiences

- being promoted, pay increases, and new professional connections

- experiencing stronger and different feelings about work

- experiencing health issues or concerns

- experiencing negative consequences that limit future career advancement

The study findings suggest action or practical recommendations to improve

representation of Black women in executive levels and the career advancement experience of the

Black women on that journey. The practical recommendations are addressed to Black women

leaders, advocates of Black women leaders and company leadership, all women and Black men

leaders, and diversity, equity, and inclusion professionals respectively. This is the complete

listing of recommendations; Figure 5.1 only included those assessed as most critical.

Recommendations for Black Women Leaders

- Meeting and exceeding expectations is the price of entry.

- Embrace that there will be several more decades of Black women first and/or only

    and develop a strong support team at work and home to support you.

- Familiarize yourself with literature on Black women leaders: it is available.

- Pursue and test that you receive direct and transparent feedback on your

    opportunities.

- Create the conditions to attract high quality mentors and influential sponsors including strong results, positive self-branding, and openness to input from others.

- Seek out and be open to a diverse group of high-quality mentors and influential sponsors.

- Pursue crucible projects and positions.

- Be mindful of the number of new work-related dimensions you accept simultaneously.

- Leverage tools for sense-making and coping including faith, spirituality, or others appropriate for you.

- Accept that many senior White leaders have minimal familiarity with professional Black women. Be open to participate in informal opportunities to increase familiarity to enable the creation of relationships characterized by trust, transparency, and respect.

- Leverage your similarities and differences with all women and Black men to learn, grow, make sense of your reality, and be supported on an individual basis and with affinity groups.

- Become more self-aware of racism and sexism in all forms, including discrimination, stereotyping, and microaggression and appropriately confront it if you see it.

- Tell your story in a safe environment. It will help you and others. Too many of us are ashamed or embarrassed to tell our stories and learn much too late that we are not alone in the struggle. In doing so, we miss the support and the learning.

- Celebrate progress in all areas of diversity, equity, and inclusion. When one of us is wronged, we are all wronged.

- Continue to be you and do what you do best with excellence. Lift others as you climb.

Recommendations for Company Leadership

- Become familiar with literature related to Black women in leadership.

- Create relationships characterized by trust, transparency, and respect with Black women.

- Seek out and provide direct and transparent feedback to Black women leaders.

- Hold yourself and your influential peer leaders accountable to sponsor and mentor top talent Black women leaders.

- Advocate for Black Women to be offered high-visibility projects and assignments.

- Increase the number of Black women in your organization to minimize the first and/or only phenomena.

- Become more self-aware of racism and sexism in all forms, including discrimination, stereotyping, and microaggression and appropriately confront it if you see it.

- Identify elements of your organization that are raced and gendered. Familiarize yourself with critical Whiteness theory.

- Accept that many senior White leaders have minimal familiarity with professional Black women. Create informal opportunities to increase familiarity to enable the creation of relationships characterized by trust, transparency, and respect.

- Assess the effectiveness of your company's diversity and inclusion policies and the inclusiveness of your organization to Black women. Act where needed.

- Ensure top talent Black women leaders have access to influential leaders.

- Ensure Black women leaders are included in all top development programs and processes; be the one to speak up and ask the uncomfortable question when the slate for advancement does not include Black women.

- Continue to support networks for women and Black leaders with funding and top credible leadership engagement. If you do not have a network for Black women, start one. Provide safe environments for Black women to discuss their experiences as a part of the work experience.

- Be intentional about selecting bosses, mentors, and advocates for Black women. Know your people. Unfortunately, managing a Black woman is not a good fit for all leaders. Address issues directly and swiftly if and when they arise.

- Be sensitive to the burdens of being new in an organization, a type of work, a level, or geography while being Black and female. Limit, when possible, the number of new dimensions to two when possible.

- Assess the number of Black professionals in your circle (Health Professionals, Lawyers, Ministers, Financial Planners, Educators, Sporting Activities, and Community Engagement). This will help to increase your biculturality.

- Explore opportunities to increase awareness of the differences in the experience of Black women versus that of your social sub-group through personal connections and literature.

Recommendations for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Professionals

- Become more familiar with research and literature on Black women leaders.

- Increase familiarity with the unique experience of being the first and/or the only.

- Cease discussing women in general as if the experience of all women is the same.

- Present data on similarities and differences between Black men and women and Black and White women.

Recommendations for Future Research

This research process created many questions that inspired opportunities for future research. These are the questions I view as opportunities or areas for continued or future research. Thirty percent of the participants earned an undergraduate degree from a historically Black college or university. Do Black women leaders from Historically Black Colleges and Universities have a distinct experience in large, primarily White companies? It was shocking that the Fortune 500 has had three Black women CEOs, but the Fortune 501 to 1000 has only had one. In a situation where there is tangible growth and change, one would expect *more* coming up through the lower half, not fewer. What is it that drives that result? Why are there so few Black women CEOs in Fortune 501 to 1000? The participants spoke of good counsel and great counsel, referring to direct and transparent constructive feedback. There appears to be reluctance among White managers to provide Black women with feedback on what is not working or how it could be better. This is important as it could limit growth, development, results delivery, and career advancement. Is this incidental or is this a pattern with Black women leaders?

The desire for Black women leaders to support each other, was striking from the conversations with participants. Is the need for this support stronger now than previously? Is it limited to certain types of work or geographies? Is it limited to the women that self-selected for the study? How does the career advancement experience for Black women differ based on working for one to two employers versus five to six over a career? What are the differences they experience?

There was minimal research found on the differences in the experience of culture shock on ethnic minorities in leadership positions as opposed to majority member leaders; this may be an area of interest for future research. How do Black women experience the change and transition of being new in organizations, types of work, geographies, and new levels or promotions? I would love to explore the experience of the leaders that advocate for Black women leaders in companies. Who are the women that paved the way for the senior executive Black women in companies beyond the four Black women Fortune 1000 CEOs? What are their stories? The experience of preparing, researching, and authoring this dissertation has been a significant experience that revealed more questions than answers. I look forward to continuing my learning journey, my research journey, and exploring options to support Black women leaders on their career advancement journey and the process of sense-making in hindsight.

Disseminating the Study Findings, Insights and Recommendations

Most dissertations are probably not read in their entirety beyond the dissertation committee and possibly a small group of friends and family. It is important to identify options to disseminate the findings to those who may benefit most from the data or are most likely to benefit from the Black women leaders at the crux of this study. I propose strategies to disseminate my results to the same four groups that were the target of the recommendations: Black women leaders, those that advocate for Black women leaders and company leadership, all women and Black men leaders, and diversity, equity, and inclusion professionals. Below are options beyond the publication of this dissertation to disseminate the information.

The highlights of the literature review, Chapter II, have been identified as important to share more broadly because a disproportionate percent of Black women I have connected with as a part of the study and beyond are unaware of the literature related to the leadership experience

of Black women leaders. I propose the information can be summarized in a more concise summary in the format of a word document or a Power Point format. It is important to deconstruct the false belief circulating that there is no literature on Black women leaders.

The main points in the findings, the discussion, and the recommendations are important to share. I propose a consolidated format in a word document, or a PowerPoint would be preferred to facilitate the digestion of the material. I propose it will be beneficial to share this with Black leaders, the leadership of affinity groups focused on Black women leaders, all women leaders, executive human resource leaders, and diversity, equity, and inclusion leadership in companies and consulting organizations. Additionally, this information should be shared with conferences focused on women in leadership and Black leadership.

Highlights from the literature on Black women and this study can also be shared through peer reviewed scholarly articles, trade journal articles, conference presentations, roundtables, workshops and posters, lecture series, guest lecturing, consulting, news media, magazines, podcasts, and blogs.

Personal Reflections

Reflection: Why and How I Arrived at My Research Topic

I would like to begin this section focused on reflection by examining why and how I landed on my research focus. I began this PhD Program with a strong interest in women in leadership. I recall speaking to dozens of groups of women and leaders of color as I traveled the United States and the world in my corporate career. I understood the importance of mentors and sponsors to career advancement. I frequently asked who in the group had mentors and how many had sponsors. Initially, I was surprised that the women reported far fewer mentor and sponsor relationships than my data on the men I knew. More shocking to me was the number of women

of all races who expressed not wanting or needing mentor and sponsor relationships. I later came to understand and accept the reality that building and maintaining relationships with generally older White men was easier for White men to initiate and maintain than women of any races. I never accepted that women seeking advancement in large primarily White companies did not believe that having these types of relationships would be helpful to their career advancement. I knew from experience that the intentional pursuit of advocacy relationships and the investment to maintain these relationships was work, and oftentimes was uncomfortable and unsuccessful.

Black women leaders must continue to make the investment to attract, build, and maintain mentor and sponsor relationships with White leaders despite the level of difficulty it may present. I am not making the case that mentor and sponsor relationships with non-Whites are not valuable. Relationships with all females, Black females, and Black men are critically important for Black women leaders and will be the focus of a next section in this chapter. We must not overlook the reality that most of the leaders in large companies are White, and many are male. If Black women intend to advance to senior executive levels in these companies, they must have strong relationships with them to have access to their insider coaching, the unwritten rules, crucible roles, visibility to influential leaders, and the advocacy that the White male leaders can uniquely offer.

My PhD journey began without a clear focus on the study participants' demographics. As the academic process entered year three, the funnel of focus narrowed to Black women leaders. I had no idea of the scope of the literature available. I was shocked to learn what literature existed since the 1980s on Black women leaders. Over my 35 plus years as a leader in a Fortune 1000 corporation, I attended hundreds of internal meetings and conferences focused on women leaders, Black leaders, and Black women leaders. In hindsight, I wondered if I was so

overwhelmed and distracted during these conferences and affinity group sessions that I somehow missed or forgot the exposure to the literature specific to Black women.

As I began writing this section, I went to my own library and located nearly 20 books I received as a giveaway or purchased at these conferences between 1983 and 2018. I confirmed that the books I received and retained in my possession did not contain as much as a single chapter on Black women leaders. I continue to find this to be remarkably interesting. Was the exclusion of the content intentional? Was the exclusion the product of ignorance or lack of awareness that the intersectional experience of Black women leaders was different from Black men and White women? Or was it possible that the content was shared, and I do not recall it? Whatever the cause, by year three of the PhD program in the summer of 2020, I was clear there was more than sufficient literature for my research topic. This was the summer marked by the murder of George Floyd and unprecedented racial unrest in the United States, in addition to the uncertainty that accompanied the escalating deaths due to COVID-19. I locked in on a research focus on Black women in leadership for several reasons.

During year three of the PhD program, I explored methodologies. Following a year of literature review on Black women leaders and methodologies, my research focus narrowed to identifying and interpreting meaning from the most impactful career advancement moments, events, or incidents of Black women leaders who achieved executive positions in large corporations.

I selected CIT as my methodology. Initially, I thought it was not a good fit for my topic, the career advancement of Black women in leadership. I had convinced myself that CIT was only appropriate for matters of life and death, like understanding the contributors to serious accidents or deaths in the military or healthcare. During the year following intensive research on the

experience of Black women leaders, the death of George Floyd, and the racial unrest that followed, I saw the experience of career advancement for Black women leaders in primarily White organizations as appropriate use of the CIT methodology. During this research experience, I adopted a mission beyond the dissertation to continue my learning journey focused on Black women leaders and share these learnings with Black women leaders and others that can influence their leadership experience, including but not limited to career advancement.

Reflection: Role as Researcher in the Research Process

My learning and insights were many and continuous. I found I needed to take breaks to process and incorporate my learning. I discovered that I loved the process of conducting research. I loved the organizing element of doing it. I am super curious and adventurous. I loved not knowing where it was going and repeatedly being surprised by the interview comments and patterns. There were quotes that caused me to stop in my tracks. The entire process was exciting to me. One of the areas where I learned most beyond my content focus was understanding and executing the role of the researcher. Throughout the dissertation process, my understanding of my role as a qualitative researcher grew exponentially. My understanding of the tasks and their sequence did not change, although it did grow. My undergraduate experience in engineering, followed by working more than 35 years managing data and people in organizations who took pride in being objective and data-driven, was deeply embedded in my worldview. I thought my passion for organizational development, my engagement in leadership development, coaching, and postgraduate studies in leadership and change would serve as a balance for my engineering way of thinking and being. I underestimated the power of the early and sustaining data-based approach to my daily work.

On my research journey, I frequently found the constructivist part in conflict with the data-based part of me. I chose to approach this research from a constructivist approach with a qualitative methodology because it was a better fit with the developmental state of the supporting literature, the research question, and my future interests in research. I had to accept that this research journey would involve internal conflict. Bleijenbergh et al. (2018) provided a perspective on the role of researchers that I found helpful on this journey:

> We as researchers cannot be divorced from our background, social identities, and, or earlier knowledge. The consequence is that we have to recognize how our background shapes who we are now as a researcher and that we take earlier knowledge with us during the research process. (p. 210)

This way of thinking became my framework for discovering and embracing my role as a researcher, which I came to refer to as the Dora the Explorer approach, mining the gems in the data landscape while traveling with curiosity, caution, and care across the constructivist, interpretivist, qualitative landscape.

The following short phrases describe my Dora the Explorer approach to the role of the constructivist qualitative researcher. Listen with all your senses. Protect privacy. Meet the participants where they are. Be aware of context. Create a safe environment that encourages truth-telling and vulnerability. Be open to different points of view. Resist the urge to judge yourself or others. Embrace your role in the construction of knowledge. Practice sense-making. Be persistent. Be assertive when you need to be. Practice patience. Be empathetic. Be reflective. Adjust when appropriate. Accurately report the data even when it is not consistent with your experience or beliefs. Research and report relevant literature. Identify the gaps in the literature. Contribute in a meaningful way to the literature. Remain current in the literature. Identify areas of opportunity for future research. Communicate with your research team as appropriate. Connect and learn from others. Leave room for the spirit to work through you. Expand hope and

the possibility for change. Practicing this approach proved challenging yet contributed to my growth as a researcher.

Reflection: On the Findings

Discovering the findings and the resulting key insights related to the career advancement experience of Black women leaders in large, primarily White, American companies was stimulating intellectually and emotionally. Major insights included the experience of being the first and/or the only, the role of spirituality and faith by some in the process of sense-making and coping, the importance of the unique roles of critical relationships with White colleagues, women leaders, and Black leaders, and the dimensions of being new in organizations. These all have been discussed. The experience of being the first and/or the only presented in such a dramatic way, I would be remiss not to share a few reflective thoughts on the topic.

In 2022, most Black women above middle management continue to repeat the experience of being the first or the only in large corporations. Upon reflection, it is a natural outcome of career progression until there is a saturation of Black women in the pipeline to the CEO position with representation reflective of Black women's numbers in the population and their graduation rates from graduate schools. Ironically, based on the current representation, the more career advancement Black women experience, the more first and only situations will be created and experienced. Participant 8 was the first to label being Black, female, and a first and only as a significant incident while acknowledging it was not a single incident but a way of being, working, being treated, and existing in a corporate environment above middle management. Other participants had mentioned first and/or only in describing their incidents but had not declared it to be the incident.

Hearing this perspective of it being an incident shifted my thinking about what an incident could be. One participant described the ongoing burden of being the first and/or the only, as the incident that keeps on giving outcomes. It appeared frequently as an antecedent to the most impactful incidents. Participants spoke about being the first and only so often, it came across as the norm. Implications of being the first and/or only is always in play, influencing the behavior of the Black women and those they encounter at work, in their families, and in their communities in which they live. Listening to their stories left me feeling that the experience of being the first and/or the only, was always with them, influencing them and others even when no one wanted it to. Their descriptions struck me like wearing a big funny hat that you cannot remove. They were proud to wear a big, funny hat. Others look at them differently at work, at home, at church, everywhere. It influenced them to feel and behave differently. They wanted so much to remove it, working hard at their days jobs while concurrently working to recruit, mentor, an advocate, enable, and include others that look like them in the hope that someday that big, funny hat can be put away forever. We have many more Ursulas, Kamalas, and Ketanjis to come. Being the first and/or the only, is still ascending.

Conclusion

I began this research to broaden my understanding of the career advancement experience of Black women leaders to executive levels in large, primarily white companies. The literature review opened my eyes to the quantity and type of research available on Black women leaders since the 1980s. During the interviews and conversations with other Black women in leadership during my research experience, most of them were convinced that there was little if any research specific to Black women in leadership. Until I began this study, I too was unaware of the literature that existed for over 30 years.

The exposure to the theoretical frameworks to facilitate understanding the career advancement experience was enlightening. The experience of conducting qualitative research expanded my appreciation of the richness of the data in a qualitative process versus a quantitative process. I learned that my interviewing skills were not as strong as I thought they were. The process of interviewing was energizing for me as the interviewer. The interviewees seemed comfortable sharing their experiences, good and bad. The transparency of their sharing exceeded my expectation. I felt honored to be trusted with their stories.

Hearing their experiences reminded me of some of my past experiences I had suppressed or forgotten. The literature review in combination with the interview experiences helped me to appreciate my place in the timeline of Black women leaders that achieved executive level positions in a Fortune 1000 company. I had lost the perspective that I was in the workplace as a leader in the early phase of Black women in management roles in the1980s. I certainly did not realize the significance at the time. I also did not realize the significance of achieving an executive level prior to 2000 as a Black woman. I also did not fully appreciate the trauma for the more than 35-year career advancement journey or the many people who supported me on that journey in many ways. I am so thankful and grateful to everyone who contributed to Team Pam.

The findings from the study are my gift to Black women leaders, leaders in general, leaders that advocate for Black women in leadership, and those that coach and consult individuals and organizations in diversity, equity, and inclusion. The summary of the practical implications and recommendations were my approach to bring the findings to life. Some of the findings were more surprising than others. It was not surprising to me that some relationships are more critical than others in relationship to the career advancement process to executive level. The criticality of the boss, the mentor, and the sponsor was not new to me. The criticality of

these relationships in combination with the reality that most of the higher-level leaders in these roles were White and male in organizations that were systemically raced and gendered exposed a level of difficulty to career advancement I had not explored intellectually. The importance or criticality of professional, personal, formal, and informal relationships with female leaders, Black leaders, and Black female leaders was not new to me; however, I learned that my experience of more full and free access to these types of relationships was not a shared experience for all the participants.

The remaining three key findings were more surprising to me. I lived the experience of being the first and/or the only most of my life since high school. In hindsight, I believe I normalized it along with much of the associated trauma. The literature review and the interviews unpacked many of these experiences in a safe and healthy process for me. Most surprising was that I thought that the first and/or only experience had peaked and would be declining in frequency. This simply is not true: There will be many more Black women leaders that experience being first and/or only in Fortune 1000 companies until each of the companies achieve representation in the C-suite consistent with middle-management representation. The role of having a strong faith orientation or spirituality in facilitating mechanisms for coping and meaning making was new to my conscious self. Unconsciously, I was aware that for those with a strong faith or spirituality that it influences everything. I knew from the words that are commonly used by Black women leaders with whom I share close relationships that faith and spirituality are often interjected in dealing with tricky situations and what appear as miracles. This insight appeared in the interviews and not in my literature review prior to the interviews.

The final finding was another that I had some subconscious awareness of, but it was not front of mind related the career advancement of Black women. This was the frequency of being

new in an organization, a position, a level, or a geography contributed to what the participants identified as most impactful career advancement incidents. I knew from my previous work experience that it was not advisable to have more than two new change dimensions in a career change. What I had not considered was the possible differences experienced by single or double minorities in managing the changes related to expectations, new cultures, new people, learning new work, and all the other transitions required in organizations that are raced and gendered when there are very few people that look like you. This is exponential culture shock. My insights and learnings were many and it is my hope that they will be helpful to others seeking to advance more Black women in Fortune 1000 companies. It is not lost on me that while this study focused on Black women who achieved executive levels in Fortune 1000 companies, many of the findings may apply to other sectors such medium and small sized corporations, non-for-profit organizations, and governmental organizations.

I want to close by revisiting the significance of this research which explored the longstanding issue of underrepresentation of Black women leaders in executive level positions in Fortune 1000 companies and was previously referenced in the background and context provided in Chapter I. The casual reader might conclude, based on the challenges reported by Black women on their journeys to executive level positions and the recommendations I provided based on the research, that there is just too much work required for the Black women and their organization leadership to pursue advancement of these Black women to the executive levels. Secondly, that reader may conclude that Black women leaders are the most disadvantaged in the process of pursuing career advancement in large companies.

I strongly believe that while the career advancement experience for these women is challenging emotionally, psychologically, and physically for themselves and their families, they

do not bear the burden of this reality alone. Their companies' key stakeholders and customers of their products and services may well be equally, if not more disadvantaged than the Black women in totality. The companies may well be the biggest losers. The companies do not deliver their best results because a portion of their leadership, the Black women, are not contributing at their peak performance and leveraging their unique capabilities to drive the results. There may be those who think, even if silently to themselves, that to avoid this situation altogether, Black women should be removed from key leadership positions and replaced with White men who are more congruent with the raced and gendered organizational culture of large American companies. Might this eliminate the challenges and allow the companies to accelerate the activities focused on producing results? As unbelievable as this is as even a thought, I argue that this strategy would bring about an even worse situation for the companies for a variety of reasons.

First, the customer and employee base for most of these companies is becoming browner with each passing day. It is critical to have the top leadership responsible for setting direction for these companies to look more like the customers they serve. This is not a moral issue, but rather a bottom-line business issue. Diverse teams have been proven repeatedly to deliver better innovation (L. E. Gómez & Bernet, 2019; Green & Hand, 2021; Hunt et al., 2018). I assert that leadership that mirrors the employee and customer base is more in-touch and adept at discerning and adapting to the needs of this type of employee and customer base. I argue that in 2022 it is detrimental to a business for their employees and customers to work with and for leadership that is out of touch with their lived experience. If stronger employee engagement along with improved top and bottom-line business results is required, accelerating the career advancement of Black women leaders is an excellent strategy that is likely to deliver and improved work

experience and learnings for all employees at all levels in the organization. Instead of talking about it, let us collectively be about the hiring and career advancement of Black women leaders in Fortune 1000 companies and beyond.

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Appendix A: Communication for Participant Referral

Subject: Looking for Black Women Executives to Participates in a Doctoral Study on Career Advancement in Large American Corporations

This is a request to refer participants for a doctoral research study on the career advancement process for Black women in Fortune 1000 companies. I am the primary researcher and a doctoral student at Antioch University in Yellow Springs, Ohio in program on Leadership and Change. This research study is much more than a requirement for my doctoral degree, it is a manifestation of my desire to support Black women and those who support them in their career advancement journey. This research study involves a short prework exercise and a 60-minute interview. Below I have outlined information about the participant criteria, the primary researcher (me), my research focus, approach, and intent.

Participant Criteria:

- Identifies as a Black woman

- Minimum 15 years of experience in management roles

- Current employee in a Fortune 1000 corporation in the United States

- In an executive level role, a position in the top 50 percent of management levels

- No relationship with the researcher

About the Researcher (Pamela J Viscione):

I was raised in Cleveland, Ohio. Attended Princeton University for undergraduate studies. I received master's degrees from Northern Kentucky University (2016) and Antioch University (2021). I retired from an executive role in a Fortune 500 company with over 35 years of service. I work part-time for Xavier University for their Leadership Development Center which provides leadership training, consulting, and coaching. I am an advisory board member for the Girl Scouts of Western Ohio and the College of Business at Northern Kentucky University.

My Research Focus, Approach & Intent:

My research focus is the career advancement experience of Black women executives in large primarily White American corporations. My interest is driven by the underrepresentation at the executive levels. This qualitative study will focus on career advancement critical incidents which are defined as an incident that has had a significant impact on career advancement process (helped or hindered). The data will be collected in an interview over Zoom and will be videotaped and transcribed for accuracy. The best ethical practices for this type of study will be used including use of pseudonyms for the participants. The privacy and confidentiality of the participants is of paramount importance, and I am happy to discuss the steps that will be taken. It is my hope that the study process and results will be helpful to the participants. Additionally, it is my intent that the insights will contribute to the body of knowledge on the topic and be helpful to Black women leaders and those who support their career advancement in addition to meeting my academic requirement. Thank you in advance for your consideration to refer potential participants. You are invited to contact me by email with any questions or concerns. Please let me know ASAP if you believe you have an interest to participate or know of a possible candidate. Feel free to share this email with potential candidates or someone who may be able to make a referral.

Pamela J Viscione via XXXX

Appendix B: Communication for Confirmed Participants

Thank you for considering taking part in this doctoral research study on career advancement of Black women leaders in large primarily White corporations in the United States. The purpose of the study was to identify insights and potential patterns across participants by investigating the most impactful incidents that helped or hindered the career advancement of Black women executives in large American corporations. Demographic data will be collected by email prior to the interview. There will be a short reflective prework exercise on impactful career advancement events to prepare for the interview. The study data will be collected in a 60-minute interview, videotaped, and transcribed for accuracy. Participants will be offered the opportunity to review the transcript for accuracy, privacy, and confidentiality.

Definition of Career Advancement Critical Incident: A career critical incident is an event that the participant believes helped or hindered their career advancement.

Prior to the Interview: The participants will be asked to reflect on their entire management career and recall their most impactful four to six career advancement critical incidents in management roles. The assignment is to note the actual incident, why it was impactful, what led to it, and the outcome.

The Interview: approximately 60 minutes

1. The participants will be asked to share four of the most impactful career critical incidents in a story format. What was the incident? Why was it impactful? What led to the incident? And what was the outcome of the incident? Most impactful can be determined by impact on career, impact on you or others, or another factor of importance to you. This process will repeat for up to four incident stories.

Appendix C: Participant Requirements & Demographics Form

Participant Criteria:

1. Do you identify as a Black (of African heritage) woman?

2. Have you worked a minimum of 15 years in management roles?

3. Are you currently an employee at a Fortune 1000 corporation in the United States? If yes, what is the companies name and Fortune 1000 ranking?

4. Are you currently in an executive level position as defined as in the top 50 percent of management levels?

5. Do you have a prior relationship with the researcher? If yes, was this within the past 15 years?

Your Name?

What is your job title?

Your job function (manufacturing, engineering, finance, marketing, human resources, etc.)?

What sector or industry is your company in?

Your primary work location, State?

How many years have you worked in management roles?

What is your current job title?

How many organizations have you worked for as a manager?

How long have you worked for your current employer?

Your Age? 30-40? 40-50? 50-60? 60+?

Appendix D: Participant Prework: Career Advancement Critical Career Incident Exercise

Definition of Career Advancement Critical Incident (CACI): A career advancement critical incident is an event that the participant believes helped or hindered their career advancement.

Task:

1. Reflect on your entire management career, recall each of your positions.

2. Re-read the definition above of a Career Advancement Critical Incident

3. Identify 4–6 of the most impactful events on you or your career (CACI's), these events could have helped or hindered your career progression

4. Feel free to use the 2nd page of this form to make notes on the incident, why it was impactful, what led to it, and the outcome if you believe that is helpful for you to tell your stories in the interview. That sheet is optional and for your use only.

During the interview you will be asked to share up to four incident-stories of your choosing. Below are the questions that I request you cover in each story.

✓ Describe the incident.

✓ When did it happen? Participant level in organization? Who else was involved?

✓ Why was the incident impactful to you?

✓ What led to the incident?

✓ What was the outcome of the incident?

✓ Did the cause of the incident, impact of the incident, or your feelings about the incident change with the benefit of time?

Career Advancement Critical Incident Summary – Optional

Research Study Purpose: Identify insights and potential patterns across participants by investigating the most impactful incidents that helped or hindered the career advancement of Black women executives in large American corporations.

Rank each incident 1-10 with 10 being the most impactful and 0 as least impactful

Rank	Incident Description	What led to Incident?	What was the outcome?	Did Your Perception Change? Why?

Appendix E: Researcher Interview Guide

Researcher Interview Guide

Interviewee Pseudonym _____   Date/ Time: _____

Research Study Purpose: Identify insights and potential patterns across participants by investigating the most impactful incidents that helped or hindered the career advancement of Black women executives in large American corporations.

Key Interview Questions

1) What is the most impactful career advancement critical incidents for Black women executives, what led to them, and what was the outcome? Why were they impactful?

2) Do the executives' perception of the incidents change with time?

3) Do the executives believe there are any themes or patterns across their career advancement critical incidents?

Critical Incident Study Interview Format

1. Turn my phone off. Greetings and thanks for participation. Confirm Pseudonym. _____Confirm practice study objective, interview format, and plan to record. Record to cloud. Participant questions? Begin recording. 5 min

2. Ask participant to describe/ tell a story about their incidents one at a time. Ask clarifying questions at end of their story as needed. Repeat the process for the next incident.

3. Close interview with requesting any questions of participant, review next steps, and thank participant again for participation.

Definition of Career Advancement Critical Incident (CCI). A career critical incident is an event that the participant believes helped or hindered their career advancement.

Single Incident Questions: Please select one of your more impactful incidents and share your incident story. Repeat this process up to four times.

Incident #1

✓ Please describe the incident.

✓ When did it happen? Participant level in organization? Who else was involved?

✓ Why was the incident impactful to you?

✓ What led to the incident?

✓ What was the outcome of the incident?

✓ Did the cause, impact, or feelings about the incident change with the benefit of time?

Incident #2

✓ Please describe the incident.

✓ When did it happen? Participant level in organization? Who else was involved?

✓ Why was the incident impactful to you?

✓ What led to the incident?

✓ What was the outcome of the incident?

✓ Did the cause, impact, or feelings about the incident change with the benefit of time?

Incident #3

✓ Please describe the incident.

✓ When did it happen? Participant level in organization? Who else was involved?

✓ Why was the incident impactful to you?

✓ What led to the incident?

✓ What was the outcome of the incident?

✓ Did the cause, impact, or feelings about the incident change with the benefit of time?

Incident #4

✓ Please describe the incident.

- ✓ When did it happen? Participant level in organization? Who else was involved?

- ✓ Why was the incident impactful to you?

- ✓ What led to the incident?

- ✓ What was the outcome of the incident?

- ✓ Did the cause, impact, or feelings about the incident change with the benefit of time?

End-to-End Study Questions:

1. Did you notice any patterns across your career advancement critical incidents?

2. Reflecting on your experience with this study, are there any insights that surfaced?

3. Is there anything else about your career advancement critical incidents you would like to share with me?

4. Thank the participant for participation. Ask if the participant has questions or concerns?

Other Researcher Observation, Follow Ups, and Notes:

Consent Form

Informed Consent for Viscione CIT Study on
Career Advancement of Black Women in Corporations

This informed consent form is to participate in the CIT Study on career advancement of Black women in corporations.

Name of Principle Investigator: Pamela Viscione
Name of Organization: Antioch University, PhD in Leadership and Change Program
Name of Project: Career Advancement of Black Women in Corporations

You will be given a copy of the full Informed Consent Form

Introduction
I am Pamela Viscione, a PhD candidate for Leadership and Change at Antioch University. This doctoral program has a requirement of a dissertation to complete the program. This form will provide you with information about the research study and invite you to be part of this research. You may talk to anyone you feel comfortable talking with about the research and take time to reflect on whether you want to participate or not. You may ask questions at any time.

Purpose of the research
The purpose of this study is to increase understanding of the experience of Black women leaders in organizations through a qualitative study focused on career advancement critical events of Black women executives in large-sized corporations. The qualitative study objective is to explore the executive's experience of their career advancement critical incidents. The goals are to identify potential patterns and related insights through thematic analysis. The study process will seek to understand the participant experience, interpret their experience, and construct meaning from their experience.

Type of Research Intervention
This research will involve your participation in an interview. I will conduct all the interviews. The women leaders will be interviewed to understand their career advancement journey through the sharing of their most impactful career advancement incidents. The incidents can be either those that helped to advance their career or those that hindered their career advancement. The assessment of what is most impactful can be made by impact on the interviewee, their career, or some other factor. Each of the interviews will be recorded for audio and video using Zoom solely for research purposes, all the participants' contributions will be de-identified prior to sharing the research results. The audio file will be transcribed using Otter.ai. These recordings, transcript, and any other information that may connect you to the study, will be kept in a password-protected file. Each interviewee will be offered the opportunity to review the transcript for accuracy and privacy.

Participant Selection

The participant selection criteria are women who self-identify as being of African heritage (Black), currently work for a Fortune 1000 company in the United States, currently hold a position in the top half of the management hierarchical levels, and have not had a relationship with me, the researcher, in the 15 years prior to this study.

Voluntary Participation

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. You may choose not to participate. You will not be penalized for your decision not to participate. You may withdraw from this study at any time. If you choose to withdraw and an interview has already taken place, the information you provided will not be used in the research study.

Risks

No study is completely risk free. However, I do not anticipate that you will be harmed or distressed during this study. You may stop being in the study at any time if you become uncomfortable. If you experience any discomfort because of your participation, employee assistance counselors will be available to you as a resource.

Benefits

There will be no direct benefit to you, but your participation may help others in the future. Some participants also find it meaningful to reflect on their experience.

Reimbursements

You will not be provided any monetary incentive to take part in this research project.

Confidentiality

All information will be de-identified, so that it cannot be connected back to you. Your real name will be replaced with a pseudonym in the write-up of this project, and only the primary researcher will have access to the list connecting your name to the pseudonym. This list, along with audio recordings of the discussion sessions, will be kept in a secure, password-protected file.

Limits of Privacy Confidentiality

Generally speaking, I can assure you that I will keep everything you tell me or do for the study private. Yet there are times where I cannot keep things private (confidential). The researcher cannot keep things private (confidential) when:

- The researcher finds out that a child or vulnerable adult has been abused,
- The researcher finds out that that a person plans to hurt him or herself, such as commit suicide,
- The researcher finds out that a person plans to hurt someone else.

There are laws that require many professionals to take action if they think a person is at risk for self-harm or are self-harming, harming another or if a child or adult is being abused. In addition, there are guidelines that researchers must follow to make sure all people are treated with respect and kept safe. In most states, there is a government agency that must be told if someone is being abused or plans to self-harm or harm another person. Please ask any questions you may have about

this issue before agreeing to be in the study. It is important that you do not feel betrayed if it turns out that the researcher cannot keep some things private.

Right to Refuse or Withdraw
You do not have to take part in this research if you do not wish to do so, and you may withdraw from the study at any time without your job being affected.

Who to Contact
If you have any questions, you may ask them now or later. If you have questions later, you may contact Pamela Viscione XXXX

If you have any ethical concerns about this study, contact Lisa Kreeger, Chair, Institutional Review Board, Antioch University Ph.D. in Leadership and Change, Email: XXXX.

This proposal has been reviewed and approved by the Antioch International Review Board (IRB), which is a committee whose task it is to make sure that research participants are protected. If you wish to find out more about the IRB, contact Dr. Lisa Kreeger.

DO YOU WISH TO BE IN THIS STUDY?
I have read the foregoing information, or it has been read to me. I have had the opportunity to ask questions about it and any questions I have, have been asked and have been answered to my satisfaction. I consent voluntarily to be a participant in this study.

Print Name of Participant_____

Signature of Participant _____

Date _____
Day/month/year

Print Name of Participant_____

Signature of Participant _____

Date _____
Day/month/year

To be filled out by the researcher or the person taking consent:

I confirm that the participant was given an opportunity to ask questions about the study, and all the questions asked by the participant have been answered correctly and to the best of my ability. I confirm that the individual has not been coerced into giving consent, and the consent has been given freely and voluntarily.

A copy of this Informed Consent Form has been provided to the participant.

Print Name of Researcher/person taking the consent_____

Signature of Researcher /person taking the consent_____

Date _____
Day/month/year

Appendix G: Recruitment Poster for Social Media or Professional Groups

Looking for Black Women Leaders to Participate in a Doctoral Study

Study Purpose:

Identify insights and potential patterns across participants by investigating the most impactful incidents that helped or hindered the career advancement of Black women executives in large American corporations.

Participant Requirements:

- Black (of African descent) women

- Currently working in the United States in a Fortune 1000 companies

- Minimum 3 years of experience in a Fortune 1000 company

- In an executive level role (top 50% of management hierarchal levels)

- A minimum of 15 years of total management experience

- Diversity in experience across participants

If interested contact the researcher at XXXX for more information