

**WHY ARE BLACK WOMEN EXECUTIVES LEAVING CORPORATE
AMERICA BEFORE REACHING THE C-SUITE?**

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ABSTRACT

Despite ample research in the fields of organizational behavior and human resource management regarding employee decisions to voluntarily opt out of corporate leadership positions, there is little research exploring the personal experiences of black women in U.S. companies contemplating leaving executive positions. This research leverages a qualitative interpretative phenomenological study to explore why Black women corporate leaders in the United States are leaving corporate America before reaching the C-Suite. Two studies were conducted to understand the lived experiences of Black women executives in U.S. Fortune 500 companies; moreover, study two further explored and detangled some of the themes from Study One to understand the experiences of the black women leaders in the pipeline for senior management more deeply. The findings identify several environmental factors, explored in depth in this dissertation, that impact executives' decision to leave corporate America. The findings provide a foundation to understand further the impact of the corporate environment resulting in the loss of top diverse talent in this understudied demographic. These findings also provide critical information for the Black woman executive currently working in corporate America as well as those who have opted to leave early and would like to better digest their experiences.

This research is in honor of my daughter, Brianna,
all of the Black Women Executives that rise in spite of the challenges,
and the Black Women Leaders that trusted me enough
to tell their stories.

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it. I still see you, my friend. Thank God for providing this village to see me through.

Prayerfully my research will help the Black women that are still in the position of being the only one and those who left early but would like to continue digesting their experiences.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

According to a McKinsey and Company report prepared in partnership with LeanIn.Org (2019), 54% of Black women in corporate America state that they are the only Black woman in their position. Additionally, the findings report that Black women feel the impact of microaggressions within the workplace, feel left out when companies ignore the dual bias of race and gender, and are more likely than their colleagues to opt out or leave based on the corporate environment (LeanIn.Org, 2020). These data points are backed up by others: Black women remain severely underrepresented in professional leadership positions, making up approximately 5.3% of the positions in U.S. companies compared to 16% of the positions held by women (Warner, 2014). There was one Black woman at the CEO level in the years leading up to 2017 – Ursula Burns of Xerox – and then two as of 2021 – Thasunda Brown Duckett, TIAA (Teachers Insurance and Annuity Association of America) and Rosalind Brewer, Walgreens; notably, Rosalind Brewer stepped down from her position in August 2023. In more recent events, October 2023, another CEO was appointed, Toni Townes-Whitley, SAIC (Science Applications International Corp) bringing the current number back up to two, totaling four since the existence of the Fortune 500 list. Research has identified many factors for why Black women could decide to voluntarily leave corporate positions before excelling to senior positions, including the lack of sponsorship, mentors, and informal networks; feelings of isolation; and not getting the strategic assignments required for upward mobility (Lanier, 2005; Beckwith, et al, 2016; Meyerson & Fletcher, 2000).

More broadly, women frequently leave the executive track for job advancement once they begin to reach the higher levels of the firm out of frustration and disillusionment (Meyerson & Fletcher, 2000). At the time of Meyerson and Fletcher's work, women only accounted for 10% of the senior manager roles, and less than 4% of those women were in the C-Suite. In addition to the organizational pressures experienced by senior women executives, the dynamic of balancing work and home life has continued to evolve. Due to the increase in life expectancy, caring for elderly parents is becoming more complex, especially while simultaneously caring for teenagers. The combination of parenting teenagers, caring for elderly parents, and the experience of menopause were found to be the impetus for women senior executives opting to retire early from successful careers (Letchfield, 2022). Organizations need to develop policies to address the 50+ year old senior executive's realities, similar to family friendly policies for employees with younger children (Letchfield, 2022). These and other preliminary studies portend that it is critical to better understand why women senior leaders voluntarily leave their positions early, after decades of training and developing the skills that landed them in senior leadership positions.

The numbers for Black women executives are even more staggering. While white males comprise 35% of the population and hold 57% of the VP roles and 68% of the C-Suite roles; white women hold 24% of the VP roles and 18% of the C-Suite roles, compared to Black women who only hold 7% of the VP roles and 4% of the C-Suite positions (LeanIn.Org and McKinsey & Company, 2019). In other words, corporate America is experiencing an expensive *leaking* pipeline of top diverse talent. It is concerning that so many qualified women opt out before getting to the executive suite.

Clearly, corporate leaders and boards seem not to understand or know how to manage the challenges that their marginalized leaders face as they climb the ladder. Given the difficulty of identifying diverse top talent in today's volatile workforce, we cannot afford to lose a large demographic that could feed the declining pipeline. As the demand for jobs outpaces talent in the Information Age, recruitment and retention have become increasingly important, and one important solution is a renewed emphasis on the need for inclusion in the workplace to meet this rising demand for talent (LeanIn.Org and McKinsey & Company, 2019).

Achieving and maintaining diversity at the higher levels of the firm is also critical to the performance of the firm. Richard et al. (2007) identified a curvilinear impact of the relationship between racial diversity and firm performance in the short term and long term, using Blau's theory of heterogeneity (1977) to explain the relationship. In the knowledge-based view, racial diversity is a competitive advantage for the firm: They write, "Over time, the negative consequences of diversity such as relational conflict will decrease, while the positive consequences such as more creativity and better problem-solving could indeed increase" as teams share their understandings and leverage their unique differences (pp. 1218). Firms cannot afford to continue to allow talented Black women to be underrepresented in corporate leadership roles or in executive positions. This issue of voluntarily opting out or early retirement needs to be addressed.

In the following sections of this paper, I first review literature on why women opt out of positions before getting to the executive levels in a corporation. I then summarize the limited research exploring the unique experiences of Black women executives in U.S. corporations to better understand the prevalence of early departure in this group and how

this trend might be reversed. In addition, I briefly argue for the need to address the underrepresentation of Black women in executive roles in the United States and the importance to the firm's performance. I then share my interpretive phenomenological methodology, data collection and analysis process on black women executives in U.S. corporations. My study is using the term Black Women in the context of the modern African Diaspora as described in the work of Kelley (2000) and Manning (2021), which I will discuss further in the literature R\review. Finally, I divulge the results and findings of the two studies and explore the expected contribution from this research.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

This research utilizes the interpretive phenomenological study approach, which prioritizes subjects' lived experiences, i.e., the subjects' direct experience and associated learnings versus a secondhand experience. Hence, the literature review will set the stage for exploring gaps in the extant literature surrounding Black women executives in the United States and confirm the need for this study. It will also shape the research questions leading to the study. While there is significant research on employees and women in general voluntarily opting out of corporate positions, the research on Black women in U.S. corporations is minimal. Below, I first examine the research on why women might opt out, and then narrow the focus to the experiences of Black women executives in the United States.

The scope of the research is designed around Black women executives in U.S. corporations that are on the list of Fortune 500 companies. The term Black woman is used in the context of the African Diaspora, which is a large and diverse community of people of African descent dispersed throughout the world as a result of forced and voluntary migration, while maintaining aspects of their historic and cultural continuity. It is inclusive of African Americans, Afro-Caribbeans, Afro-Latinos and Black Canadians. (Manning, 2021; Kelley, 2000) The term is also an analytical term that allows scholars to discuss Black groups across national borders and a political term used to highlight the shared experiences of Africans who were distributed by the slave trade to various countries. (Kelley, 2000).

The context of my research is limited to the population of women within the African Diaspora that is identified more by their African heritage and is serving or has served as an executive leader in a Fortune 500 company in the United States. For example, the Afro-Latinos that are associated more with European culture would fall outside of the study since their experiences may differ from Afro-Latinos that are identified more by their African characteristics. For the purposes of the research and this paper, I use the term Black women to identify the subjects.

Why Women Leave Corporate Positions

The Lean In organization in partnership with McKinsey & Company conducted the largest study on the state of women in corporate America, publishing results and updates to the study from 2015 through 2021. LeanIn.Org proceeded to extend the research to conduct the largest study on the experiences of women and women of color at work (LeanIn.Org, 2020). The initial study draws from a very large population of working women, “since 2015, more than 590 companies employing more than 22 million people, along with a quarter of a million individual employees, have participated in Women in the Workplace” (LeanIn.Org 2020, p. 2). The findings, consistent with other previous research (Horowitz, et al, 2003; Earle, 2003; Oladapo, 2014 and Giscombe & Mattis, 2002), identified that women opted out of corporate positions for several reasons, including the work environment, lack of challenging work or opportunities for advancement, lack of support from upper management, compensation, and performance incentives, among others. Similarly, in a broader study of 663 adults examining the conditions under which employees would stay with a company or leave, 51% of employees and job seekers cited the physical workplace as a factor in the decision (Earle,

2003). These findings are consistent with prior research on retention strategies and employee early retirement (Oladapo, 2014; Messmer, 2006; van Dam et al., 2009). Although compensation is key for retaining top talent, other facts like a positive work environment, challenging work, and opportunities for advancement were also critical to decisions concerning whether to stay or take an early out. When compared to other employees in the early retirement study, the employees who expected to experience an engaging work environment with task changes, development chances, and support and praise from their coworkers and supervisor expressed less interest in opting out and retiring early.

The ability to achieve a reasonable work life balance and support from leadership were also key findings in the research (van Dam et al., 2009). In recent years, work-life balance and quality of life are much more in the forefront for high level employees who have the option to retire early or opt out of corporate positions for family-friendly work (Horowitz et al., 2003). Retention strategies found to be highly effective include the ability to receive challenging work, which was ranked at 83%, the opportunity for development 67% and receiving support from senior leaders or upper management 50% (Horowitz et al., 2003). Each of these impediments (e.g., lack of visible, challenging assignments that could lead to upward mobility, the work environment, lack of support from senior leadership along with consideration for family friendly practices for improved work life balance) are challenging for women and could be barriers to excelling in the organization. Although research regarding early retirement and retention strategies have primarily focused on all employees, the findings are very relevant to the experiences of women employees and women leaders, specifically.

Another critical concern is the issue of women not being promoted to managerial levels, thereby reducing the pipeline feeding upper management positions. Recent statistics show that while 49 % of entry level positions are held by women, the percentage decreases to 38% at the managerial level, 31% at the VP level, and only 22% for C-Suite positions (LeanIn.Org and McKinsey & Company, 2019). While there is a fair amount of research regarding why women are underrepresented at the higher levels of the firm (Beckwith et al., 2016; Davis, 2016; Earle, 2003; Giscombe & Mattis, 2002; Horowitz et al., 2003; Smith, 2021), additional research is necessary to understand what might be preventing women from excelling. Despite some women breaking through these barriers, there are many more that opt out or are not receiving the opportunities necessary to compete (Myerson & Fletcher, 2000). In some cases, the gender discrimination that prevents women from being better represented in leadership roles is inherent in the institution and becomes invisible to those participating in the acts (Myerson & Fletcher, 2000). In such a case, a strategy of small wins is helpful when increasing the number of women in corporate executive positions so that it is not met with resistance from the organization when faced with too much change (Myerson & Fletcher, 2000).

The above research begins to shed a light on what might be happening to the pool of qualified women candidates who are not making it to the higher levels of the corporation. The underrepresentation of women at the executive level continues to increase, exacerbating the phenomena of isolation for those that do break through and get to the executive ranks. Although the above research did not focus on Black women specifically, the impact is arguably even greater since there are fewer Black women employees in the corporate workforce.

Unique Experiences of Black Women Executives

There is significant research pertaining to the retention of top talent and how to keep individuals motivated within an organization, and a fair amount of research about retention strategies for women as discussed above. However, there is considerably less research about retention strategies specifically for Black women, and it certainly does not address many of the challenges that arise from the multiple and intersectional biases presented by both gender and race/ethnicity. Earle (2003) was primarily concerned with how the work environment impacted the employee's job performance and well-being. While it acknowledged the greater demand for talent after the shift to the knowledge-based economy, and corporations receiving less resumes as the shift occurred, the study did not examine the impact specifically for Black women in corporate positions, and how not addressing the issue of their underrepresentation will negatively impact the supply for the increased demand for talent or how would impact the Black women. Additional research is required to determine if the work environment is a key factor for Black women executives when deciding to exit their career trajectory in corporate America.

The work environment could have a negative impact on the Black woman due to the dual bias of race and gender as noted in the extant literature on the intersectionality theory. Crenshaw (1989) raised the awareness of the conceptualization of intersectionality by articulating the marginalized effect on Black women when the dual bias of race and gender is ignored. Notably, a survey of 1735 Black women in 30 Fortune 1000 companies revealed four primary challenges that Black women in executive roles in corporate America experience that adds to the complexity of their upward mobility: "the lack of high visibility assignments, minimal informal networking with influential

colleagues, the lack of influential sponsors and Black women company role models” (Giscombe & Mattis, 2002, p. 110). These findings are similar to the research above regarding women in general (Horowitz et al., 2003; LeanIn.Org and McKinsey & Company, 2019; Messmer, 2006), but are more complicated when seen through the filter of the dual bias of race and gender. Black women experience a “double outsider” status and report exclusion from informal networks as one of the barriers and challenges, which could lead to reduced visibility and promotional opportunities (Anderson, 2011; Smith, 2021). Given the statistics, barriers in the workplace, and the male dominated culture, Black women executives and those aspiring to become leaders in major organizations are often isolated in corporate positions and again may choose to opt out of the corporate world long before being considered for the C-suite.

Another major factor cited by the McKinsey and company report is a “broken rung” at the first critical step up to manager. “For every 100 men promoted to manager, only 58 Black women are promoted, despite the fact that Black women ask for promotions at the same rate as men.” (LeanIn.Org, 2020, p. 6). This behavior starts the downward spiral of not having enough Black women in the pipeline of talent at senior levels in the business similar to the findings for all women: “Basically, there are fewer Black women to promote at every subsequent level, and the representation gap keeps getting wider” (LeanIn.Org, 2020, p. 6).

In summarizing the results of the research on the state of Black women in corporate America (Lean In, 2020), experiential patterns emerged. The report details, “Women communicated having a worse experience than their male counterparts; women of color report having a worse experience than their white women colleagues; and Black

women report having the worst experience among all of the groups” (LeanIn.Org, 2020, p. 3). Several of the reasons discussed for the lack of positive experiences in the study included experiencing microaggressions in the workplace, being the only Black woman or person of color in the room, the lack of acknowledgement of the unique challenges experienced in the workplace due to the double bias of gender and race, and the lack of sponsorship (Lean In, 2020).

Experiencing microaggressions at work, which include comments and acts that implicitly denigrate or disregard someone based on their gender, ethnicity, or identity, is not an unusual occurrence for women (LeanIn.Org, 2020). Moreover, because Black women are subjected to both racism and sexism, they are the targets of more microaggressions than other women (LeanIn.Org, 2020). The report writes, “They are more likely to have their judgment called into question in their field of expertise and be requested to give more proof of competence. They are also nearly twice as likely as white women—and more than three times as likely as men—to have someone in their workplace express astonishment about their communication skills or other abilities” (LeanIn.Org, 2020, p. 14). When seen as individual events, microaggressions may appear inconsequential. But in the aggregate, because they occur on a regular basis, they have a broader impact on the employee. These subtle insults and invalidations, whether deliberate or not, send a message of disrespect. When employees are frequently undervalued and unfairly treated, it is difficult for them to perform at their best. Ultimately, women who are subjected to microaggressions are three times more likely than those who are not to consider opting out of their positions in the organization (LeanIn.Org and McKinsey & Company, 2015, LeanIn.Org, 2020).

Another factor is that Black women in corporate leadership positions are often the only Black woman at that level in their firm (Beckwith et al., 2016; Lanier, 2005; LeanIn.Org, 2020; Linnabery, 2014; Meuser et al., 2016). When you are the only one in a position, it could lead to some experiences of isolation (Beckwith et al., 2016), and it is likely that some of the challenges experienced may not be known or understood by others in the organization. At the same time, it also produces feelings of being seen as the representative of all Black women, magnifying your successes and failures putting even more pressure on the individual to perform. Moreover, Black women report exclusion from informal networks as one of the barriers and challenges, which could lead to reduced visibility and promotional opportunities which could ultimately impact the performance as well as the desire to stay in an organization (Anderson, 2011)

This is also evidence that the demands in work culture are different for Black women (Linnabery et al., 2014) Under a theory known as demand-control theory, “the lack of organizational experiences and career development opportunities are associated with the environmental factors that limit job control”, resulting in increased psychological strain (Linnabery et al., 2014, p. 54). Social support internal and external to the organization and coping strategies are also related to the well-being of Black women. It is critical that support structures are maintained internal and external to the organization to offset the isolation that can be experienced. This social support network is not only required for the well-being of Black women, but it is also critical to navigating the political landscape for upward mobility within the organization, especially in senior leadership positions (Smith, 2021)

Sponsorship and advocacy are required for individuals to successfully gain access to higher levels of leadership (Giscombe & Mattis, 2002; LeanIn.Org and McKinsey & Company, 2019). There is a need for influential sponsorship of Black women throughout an organization to advocate on her behalf during strategic human resource discussions. Given the very nature of corporate culture, it is more difficult for leaders to identify with Black women and be willing to perform as a sponsor. Nevertheless, it is absolutely critical to have an internal sponsor when rising to high levels within the corporate structure (Smith, 2021). Sponsorship is more powerful than mentorship based on the sponsor's realm of influence and the impact on the protégé's career. However, Black women are less likely to have sponsors than their white male counterparts: 24% of Black women felt like they had the sponsorship needed to advance their career, compared to 33% of their male colleagues (Lean In, 2020). The increased representation of Black women in the C-Suite will continue to be stalled until this issue of sponsorship is addressed.

Addressing the Underrepresentation of the Black Woman in Leadership

Understanding the issues described in the research cited above is necessary to help Black women overcome the challenges of the workplace environment. Studies have shown that firm performance is positively related to gender and racial diversity in leadership positions (Richard et al., 2007). There is compelling evidence that organizations benefit from diverse leadership and that “female representation in top management improves firm performance” (Dezo & Ross, 2012, p. 1072). Thus, it is critical to better understand the experiences of Black women in corporate positions and determine what causes them to opt out before obtaining top positions of leadership.

Every company must craft and implement policies designed to retain, develop, and motivate top executive talent. However, the unique and, importantly, little understood challenges of retaining and motivating Black women executives in senior positions are not often enough addressed by, with or through these policies (Giscombe & Mattis, 2002). Theories such as trait theory, leadership attribution theory, and leadership and followership cognition have focused on the processes that affect how women are perceived as leaders (Meuser et al., 2016). Gender diversity researchers have not yet performed extensive comparisons of how women and men engage in various leadership behaviors nor in their effectiveness (Meuser et al., 2016). If women utilize different models of leadership, it is probably because their social interaction with other executives is impacted in a way that increases their feelings of isolation (or repression). Black women' leadership models have been studied to an even lesser extent than women in general (Meuser et al., 2016).

Davis conducted a phenomenological study capturing the elements of leadership development and experiences of Black women leaders in the academic and business sectors, challenging structural and normative assumptions (Davis, 2016). The results demonstrated that the interaction of race and gender contributed to the aspects of Black women executives' leadership growth in the academic and corporate worlds. Study participants had all experienced the negative impact of race and gender on their careers with some reporting experiences “of being invisible, voiceless, discriminated against, isolated, undermined, treated unfairly, oppressed, challenged, and demoted” (Davis, 2016, p. 8). Although feelings of isolation, being invisible and undermined were experienced, the leaders in the study expressed their determination to push through and

drive to leadership roles with mentoring and sponsorship (Davis, 2016). Similarly, (Lanier, 2005) examined how African American women experience isolation in the workplace, determining that isolation impacted their job engagement and performance as well as their self-image. Moreover, one third of the participants expressed that workplace isolation had impacted their decision to leave corporate America.

In terms of overall firm performance, it is clear that race does matter (Richard et al., 2007). Indeed, *“as the demographic landscape continues to change, it is those companies that proactively acknowledge, value, and exploit diversity that will profit most.”* (Richard et al., 2007, p. 1229). Corporate officers will need to intervene and work on the culture for true inclusion and equity to be realized. Although Black women are experiencing the negative impacts of being in the intersection of race and gender, there are strategies that can be put in place to support the successful climb up the corporate ladder (Lean In, 2020; Smith, 2021; Linnabery et al., 2014). A better understanding of Black women executive experiences will benefit organizations by improving retention rates of Black women leaders, ultimately leading to increased firm performance (Dezo & Ross, 2012). The organization’s culture is critical in shaping how isolation is managed by the leader and determining if it negatively or positively impacts job performance or the Black woman executive’s decision to stay or opt out. The research will ultimately benefit Black women leaders by lifting their voices and sharing their lived experiences of isolation in the workplace.

CHAPTER 3

STUDY ONE

Research Methodology

To better understand the lived experiences of Black women executives leaving corporate positions, a qualitative study was conducted using the interpretive phenomenological methodology. Qualitative research is appropriate for this study as it is used to better understand individuals, their motivations, and behaviors, as well as the larger context in which they live and work. It is used to better understand why people behave the way that they do. Talking to people directly and interpreting their responses is the best way to gain this understanding (Myers, 2020). The research was grounded in inductive reasoning, utilizing the understanding of the lived experiences of Black women executives in the study, to better understand the phenomenon of Black women exiting corporate America before getting to the C-Suite. This research intends to improve our understanding of why Black women continue to be underrepresented at the executive levels of the firm.

The lack of research on this critical issue makes this research ripe for the use of an exploratory phenomenological study. Interpretive phenomenological analysis enables researchers to gain knowledge from an in-depth interaction with a small number of subjects in a study (Smith & Osborn, 2015). Each participant in the study has distinct experiences that the Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) methodology seeks to investigate and address in relation to the situations in which the subject's experience occurred (Berber & Acar, 2021). This gives researchers the ability to investigate minute

variations among subjects, yielding possible explanations of a certain phenomenon. The methodology includes the following elements: a guiding theoretical framework that is primarily concerned with understanding the lived experiences of subjects and interpreting how they experience the world and make sense of it. Secondly, formulating research questions produce a better understanding of the personal experiences and interpretation of the meaning of them in a specific context. Third is the use of small samples using the purposive sampling method to collect the data along with semi structured or open-ended interviews to gather first person accounts of the lived experiences (Braun & Clark, 2021; Smith & Osborn, 2007; Smith et al., 2009). Homogeneous purposive sampling will be discussed in the sampling and data collection section.

This interpretive phenomenological study methodology was extremely valuable in helping to establish context-based explanations of the organizational phenomena surrounding the underrepresentation of Black women executives in high-level positions in corporate America, and why they depart from their career trajectory. The review of prior literature shows that there are many reasons that cause women of color to have a negative experience in corporate leadership positions. The few that have made it to the C-Suite have offered strategies to cope with the environment and have provided insight into their experiences and how they achieved their successful rise to the top. This study will hopefully build upon our understanding of their lived experiences, both positive and negative, and offer theoretical insights to creating organizational, policy, social changes and begin the conversation of caring for the overall well-being of the Black woman executive.

Data Collection

The data was collected using the homogeneous purposive sampling. This methodology is typically used with interpretative phenomenological research since the study normally includes a small closely defined group that fits the criteria of the study. (Smith, J., et al, 2009; Berber, A., & Acar, A. G. 2021). The goal is to concentrate on the specific resemblance of the participants and how it pertains to the subject of the research. The sample is normally drawn from people with similar demographics relating to the study which could include socio-economic status, race or ethnicity, job or life experiences, gender in a particular geography, culture, etc. (Etikan, et al., 2016).

Data collection began with the recruitment of subjects: Black women who have served or are currently serving at a level of VP or above in a Fortune 500 company. The subjects were recruited using the following methods: Solicitation of the researcher's professional networks created during tenure in the corporate world and Executive Doctorate in Business Administration, EDBA, colleagues by providing information about the study and the criteria for participation to identify potential volunteer participants. A flyer was also posted on LinkedIn, and shared across multiple adjacent networks based on the researchers' LinkedIn connections to broaden the opportunity to connect with subjects from different backgrounds that meet the criteria. This extended the search for the group of subjects beyond the researcher's personal network created another opportunity to reduce the self-biases in the study. See Appendix A for the flyer that was circulated on social media.

In this case, the subjects included seven Black women executives who were currently serving or who have served in a position of VP and above in Fortune 50

companies. This allowed for comparison across the two groups of executive's experiences and decision-making processes. The sample size for subjects remained low, up to 10 for the study as recommended by the extant literature (Braun & Clark, 2013). The demographics of the subjects varied although they were all Black women executives in Fortune 50 companies. The subjects were between 45 and 65 years of age. Five had served at the VP level and 2 at the SVP level, while three participants were in the executive position. The SVP that exited early did consultant work for a few years subsequent to her SVP role and now serves as a professor in academia. All of the participants had earned a master's degree, and four of the seven participants were married. See Table 1 for detailed demographic data.

Table 1

S1 Demographics of Subjects.

Subject	Age	Education	Title	Marital Status	Children	Exit or Stay
P1	60+	M	VP	D	Y	E
P2	60+	M	VP	M	Y	E
P5	60+	M	VP	D	Y	E
P6	50+	M	SVP	M	Y	E
P3	40+	M	VP	M	Y	S
P4	50+	M	SVP	M	N	S
P7	50+	M	VP	D	Y	S

Semi Structured Interviews

The researcher conducted seven semi-structured recorded interviews utilizing the Zoom platform. The researcher conducted the interviews in a personal office space to ensure privacy during the interviews. The interview questions were theoretically derived, driven by who, what, how, when, and why (Bohm, 2004). The research topic, methodology and interview protocol were approved by Temple University's Institutional Review Board, IRB, on January 13, 2023, under the status of exempt review, in advance of the interviews. The IRB certificate of approval is located in Appendix B for review. To preserve the idiographic nature of phenomenology, the questions were open-ended to encourage the subjects to expand upon their answers regarding their experiences. The interview was structured in four parts; Part I started with exploring the subject's background and definition of success to lay the groundwork for the discussion, Part II discussed the subject's description of her corporate environment to get the context of her experiences, Part III centered on the subject's experience as a Black Women in corporate America, and Part IV focused on gaining an understanding of the dynamics around the decisions to stay or go depending on if the subject is still within corporate America or if she had already exited.

A pilot interview was conducted with one Black woman executive, who had retired from corporate America early due to health reasons, to trial the interview protocol. Several changes were made to the protocol subsequent to the pilot to remove questions that appeared to lead the subject. An example of questions that were removed include the mention of preferential treatment for promotions and positions leading to opportunities for advancement or referencing microaggressions in the workplace. Additionally, several

prompts were added to the protocol to ask about the executive's typical workday and a discussion on the level of candor the subject was comfortable with throughout the interview. The prompts regarding candor were strategically placed throughout the interview to ensure that authentic answers were provided yielding the rich data that was desired to be obtained through the research. The remaining questions produced a solid understanding of the subject's lived experiences in corporate America as desired by the research. The duration of the interviews was between 60 and 90 minutes with an average of 76 minutes. The updated interview protocol is detailed in Appendix C.

The semi structured interviews were conducted using Zoom technology for the use of its audio and video capabilities. The sessions were recorded on the Zoom platform, and the data was then downloaded into Otter.ai, which was selected due to the 85% accuracy with the transcription rate to reduce the time spent cleaning the data. The data was cleansed of the misinterpretations of the speakers' words by the AI tool to ensure that the words delivered by the subjects were captured correctly before coding. The cleansed data file was then imported into NVivo for manual coding and data analysis. In total, 51 codes emerged from the data which translated into eight categories and three superordinate themes, which will be further discussed in the findings.

Reflexivity

In qualitative research, it is very difficult, if not impossible, to quiet all biases of researchers and participants when exploring one's lived experiences. It is particularly difficult when the researcher has some similar experiences as the subjects in the study and fits the demographics of the studied sample group. As in this case, the researcher, a former Black woman VP who served 27 years in a Fortune 50 company and with more

than ten years at the senior executive level, and who exited corporate America at the age of 49 to pursue entrepreneurial interests and nonprofit community interests, shares very similar backgrounds with the subjects in the study. It was critical to utilize bracketing techniques throughout the research process, beginning with having a strategy to mentally prepare for the interviews to maintain a focus on the subjects' experience and incorporating the researcher's point of view and feelings into the analysis. While the bracketing process and other techniques described below does not eliminate all biases in the study, it serves to acknowledge and limit the biases of the researcher throughout the study. The four strategies for achieving bracketing (Chan et al., 2013) included mental preparation for the interview; limiting the literature review to enough literature to shape the research without influencing the outcome; using the interview protocol as a guide and not allowing it to dictate the questions during the data collection phase and the fourth strategy was using the hermeneutic or interpretive approach to the data analysis phase of the study.

In addition to bracketing, the mirroring technique was used during interviews, wherein the subjects' language is utilized to construct additional questions or comments to ensure that the researcher stayed focused on the subjects' world versus an interpretation, to further reduce the researcher's biases (Myers & Newman, 2007). The bracketing technique described above continued to be practiced throughout the study, including the data collection and analysis to clearly hear the voices of the subjects (Chan et al., 2013). By using the bracketing techniques, the researcher can comprehend their own experiences without having them contaminate how they view and interpret the experiences under study. Although bracketing is difficult in phenomenological work

because the researcher has some knowledge of the phenomenon being studied and selects participants through homogeneous purposive sampling, there are steps that can be taken to minimize the biases (Creswell & Poth, 2016). In this study, I also used field notes during the interview to note my feelings and continued to mirror what I heard when following up on questions in addition to the bracketing techniques above. For example, when the subjects relayed experiences that I could empathize with based on my own experience, I jotted down what I felt and then repeated or summarized what I heard in the subject's words to ensure that it was captured in the appropriate language.

Data Analysis

The analytic focus of Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis is on the idiographic approach, which focuses on each case, and then the thematic approach, identifying themes across participants (Braun & Clark, 2020). The data analysis goes deep into each subject's experiences, developing themes for each case before developing codes and themes across all subjects. The individual analysis focuses on language, tone, and emotion, all to ensure that the true lived experiences are captured (Smith et al., 2009). It is critical in a phenomenological study for the researcher to advance language that reflects the way the subject thinks and feels during the interpretation of the data. This technique allows the researcher to ensure that the lived experiences are captured for each subject before aggregating the data for the overall study. This also provides an opportunity for the researcher to reduce self-biases by focusing on the language and emotion of the subject's experience versus their own (Braun & Clark, 2021).

The notes are formalized and detailed systematically, similar to codes at the individual level. The notes/codes are then further analyzed until themes emerge. Once all

subjects are analyzed and experiences are coded, the procedure is repeated across all subjects so that superordinate themes are determined that become the foundation of the research (Braun & Clark, 2020; Berber & Acar 2021; Smith & Osbourne, 2007).

Ultimately, close adherence to the IPA thematic analysis process leads to a better understanding of the lived experiences of Black women executives in Fortune 500 companies and their decisions to stay or opt out of corporate America.

Findings

Seven subjects were studied using the interview protocol as a guide as described in the methodology section above. Throughout the process of the individual and group level coding, 51 individual codes, 28 group level codes, eight categories and three superordinate themes emerged from the data and the rich descriptions of the lived experiences provided by the participants. There were consistent narratives across all of the individual subjects of the superordinate themes; the impact of environmental support from within and external to the organization, the phenomenon of feeling valued and a sense of belonging or being connected within the organization and ideals around financial stability and being in a position to provide support for the immediate and extended family. Figure 1 shows the relationship of the group codes, categories and super ordinate themes that were developed through the analysis.

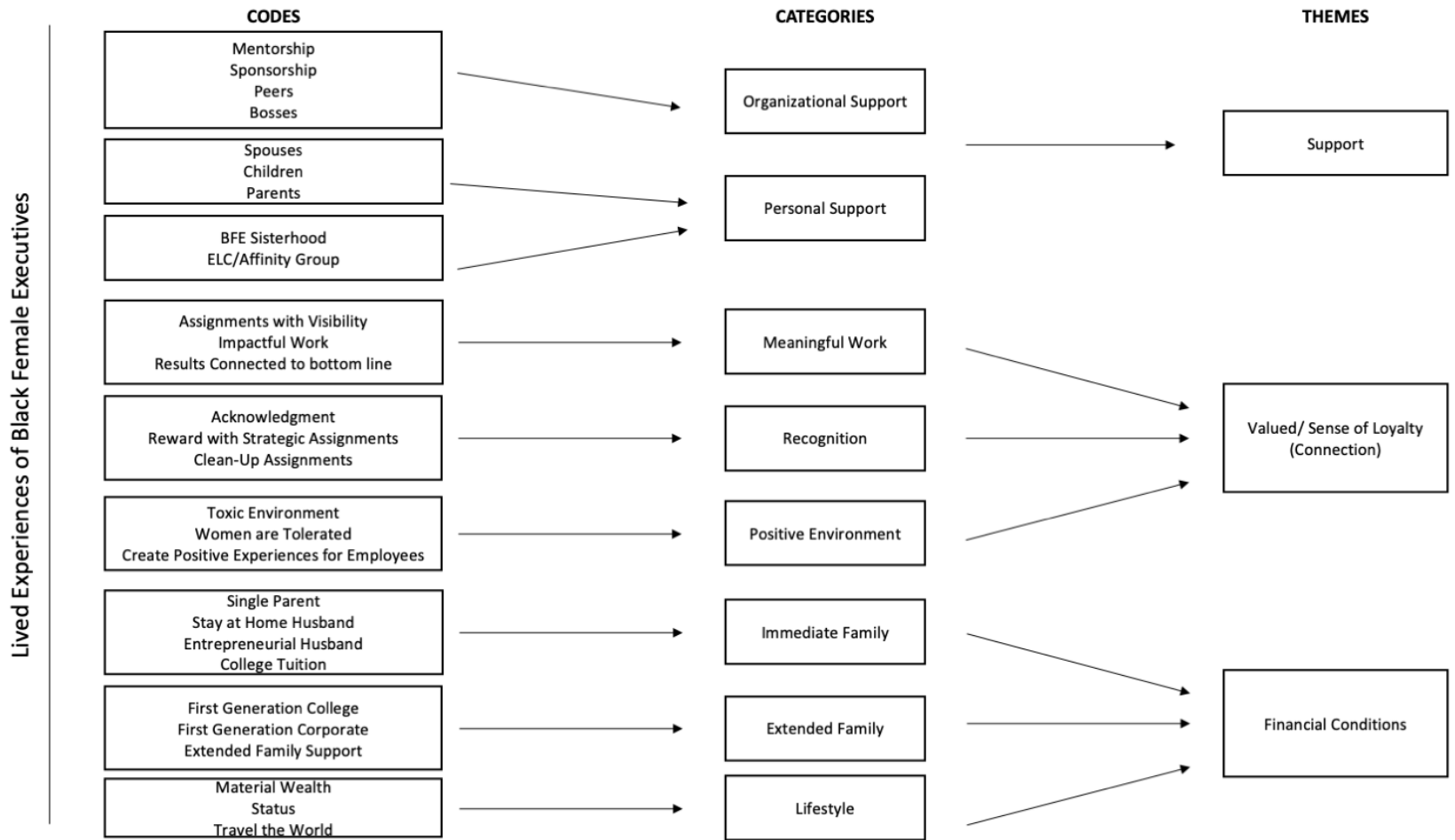


Figure 1. Lived Experiences of Black Women Executives; Codes, Categories and Themes

Support

There was significant alignment within the subjects around the need for support through mentorship and sponsorship within the organization in order to ascend to the executive level and achieve higher levels of success. There were also significant discussions around support required external to the organization from other Black women executives referred to as “the sisterhood”, from family and affinity groups to support Black executives in the climb to C-Suite positions and executive boards. Support within and external to the organization was identified as a critical factor in the decision to stay or go. The subjects in the study were consistently able to develop support structures for themselves during their ascension to the senior leadership positions. However, subjects reported greater difficulty receiving support at higher levels: Specifically, several subjects indicated that they lost interest in ascending to the C-Suite once they understood the political environment present at that level versus the results-focused environment that they had grown accustomed to at lower levels. One subject indicated that she understood that the company was too expensive of a place to be for her after she had already invested so much there. Another subject in a very different environment found a way to stay connected with the results and create a supportive environment in which she felt valued and a sense connection with the organization. The outcomes of the different experiences seemed to be impacted by the different environments, corporate cultures, and lines of business (technology, HR finances, etc.). The executives in technology-based organizations found it more difficult to find support at the higher levels of the firm. Table 2 outlines some of the narratives regarding support as stated by the subjects in the research.

Table 2.

Support

P1	Organizational Support and the Sisterhood
	(Sponsorship and direct feedback from a senior leader in the business and the support from the sisterhood)
	<p>As my number one mentor, he taught me how to play the game because he was a master at it. It was always about being the best you could, it was all about putting in the time, the commitment, and coming to the table ready to go. Also, I learned how to ask for help. Probably a little bit of arrogance on my part, because of my private school and Ivy League education but, like everybody else, I need to ask for help; and I learned the hard way, but I did learn, and I was successful.</p>
	<p>However, it was the sisterhood for me. I had some “bad” sisters that I could talk to and trust that got me through the hard times.</p>
P2	Organizational, Family Support and the Sisterhood
	(Sponsored early on by a women senior leader in the business who observed her grit and talent; also support from the senior level sisterhood)
	<p>Early in my career, when I wasn’t being heard by the men, a female senior leader said we need to talk. She helped me with learning to get my point across without being angry and not changing my personality, just the tone. Everyone in that room will know that you aren't playing and that you meant what you said, but it wasn't in your face. And it didn't make them feel like they were being threatened. I did not want to be viewed as someone who was just saying what people wanted me to say. That would have bothered me even more. She taught me a different way, which was a lot.</p>
	<p>Also, I could not have succeeded without the support of my family and the love and the tips from a clear set of sisters, because when all else was done, when I felt like I didn't want to do this anymore, when I thought I couldn't get it done by myself. There was a core group of sisters who were there for me.</p>
P3	Organizational and Family Support
	(Sponsorship by senior level white males in the organization and family support)
	<p>I've also been fortunate to be mentored on many occasions along the way from men and women, including two Black women and a few white women. However, it's actually been white males, who have been really influential in moving the needle in helping me to move to that next level.</p>
	<p>I had to go home and tell my teenage daughter that I wasn’t going to be a home a lot because I was picking up additional responsibilities and a larger team so it will require more travel. Although I dreaded the conversation, because she was already having a tough time, when I told my daughter, she said, “You go Mom. I am so proud of you! You are a boss!” It made me feel better about being a trailblazer in a technical organization. I was the only female at this level, but my daughter gave me the energy to continue.</p>

Table 2.

(continued)

P4	Organization and Family Support
	(Sponsorship by a male senior leader early in her career and family)
	<p>My sponsor is for sure the boss that I have now and have been for about ten years. To give just a little context, I've been in a new role for six months, but I worked for him before in my career. So, when he got a promotion to another city, he basically pulled me up there as well. I had to interview with a panel and get the same evaluation as my peers, so he made sure that I earned my seat at the table, but he created the opportunity.</p>
	<p>My mom who raised three kids as a single mom going from being a stay-at-home mother to working on making parts for the space shuttle is my role model and support, and of course my husband who is brilliant.</p>
P5	Organizational Support
	(Early sponsorship from a male in middle management)
	<p>I've had at least three sponsors; including my first director in the technology industry, I was the first college higher in operations which was rare, and he took a chance on hiring me because the HR manager said (back in the day), this girl is really smart. With an MBA, we can use her. So, they brought me in, and I took over the jobs, and he continued to mentor me.</p>
P6	Organizational and Family Support
	(Early sponsorship by senior level males in a newly formed company that carried over to the Fortune 50 company)
	<p>I was always confident because I knew that I was smart from the beginning. And I just didn't let being a Black female or the only Black in the organization become a factor for me. I worked hard at delivering the results and finally someone was brave enough to promote me to Director. The chief guy said, why isn't she a director? I guess I was just so used to being the only one, and it was different in a small company. They just needed someone to get the work done. The chief guy became a sponsor.</p>
	<p>Once I got the job, I was able to put in the hours to get the results because my husband took on a lot of the responsibilities with my son.</p>
P7	Organizational and Family/ the Sisterhood Support
	(Senior level male sponsorship early in her career and then Senior level Women sponsorship later in her career along with peer and family support)
	<p>Support is a real thing! We all get it from different people. We all get it in different ways. You know, I have amazing and dynamic support from my family structure and I'm grateful for that. But I also have amazing support from, you know, tons of people that I work with that I've been able to forge strong relationships with over time. I mentioned some of the Black female leaders, coming in the door with the Black girl magic in a real kind of way, so that when imposter syndrome or that self-doubt is creeping up, because you're so afraid that you're going to mess something up, you know that people are championing you and cheering you on. And I'm saying it, shouting into the rooftops, right, that Black girl magic is a real thing.</p>

Value and Sense of Belonging

The second superordinate theme that emerged from the data was the phenomenon around feeling valued in the organization by obtaining meaningful work, recognition and feeling a sense of belonging. The sense of feeling like you are a part of something bigger and contributing to the overall bottom line of the company seemed to be critical. The discussion on obtaining meaningful and impactful work that is connected to the bottom line centered around the understanding that assignments in strategic positions are required when seeking to move to senior leader levels in the business. Assignments that are strategic in nature where you can demonstrate your critical thinking and leadership skills. One subject discussed it in terms of landing an operations assignment in a technical company to show that she understood the business and could get results with large teams in a core area. The top operations jobs required sponsorship to obtain, which led back to the initial superordinate theme of support.

The notion of being valued was also seen as a feeling of acceptance in an organization versus tolerance. Several participants talked about being tolerated until they proved themselves in a male dominated culture which wasn't always a natural fit. There was also a discussion about ensuring that technical women did not allow their technical acumen to be undervalued by being assigned administrative staff positions too soon in their career so that they could continue to lead technical organizations and grow with the rapidly evolving technology. Given the gender and ethnic demographics of the careers in the STEM field, this is critical for talent across all levels, for women in technology, not just at the senior leadership level. One subject talked about the importance for technical Black women to exercise their technology prowess in early positions in their career as

well as in middle management positions to be considered for senior leader positions in technology organizations as well as for priming the pipeline for diversity leadership in the technical space. Retaining diverse talent in technical positions will have a positive impact on the overall environment which could culminate in decisions to stay when faced with other opportunities. Table 3 is an example of the narrative from the subjects on being valued in an organization.

Financial Stability and Support

The theme of being valued and supported from within also leads to feeling loyal to the organization which impacts the decision of whether to stay on your career trajectory or leave when faced with an opportunity. This leads to the third superordinate theme, financial stability, which also impacts the decision to stay or leave when faced with opportunities within or the decision to fully exit the corporate culture. Each subject discussed providing financial support to their immediate families, extended families and in some cases friends. The subjects that were first generation corporate officers wanted to ensure that their children, parents, and siblings were financially ok and that they were in a position to generate generational wealth. As they approached the topic of the dynamics of their decision to stay or go, financial stability was a factor. In some cases, they were the primary person providing financial means to the family so they may stay even if the above conditions of support and value were not met. The opposite is also true, the subjects may choose to stay after becoming financially sufficient, because the support and value is being provided by the organization. Although this theme is a factor, it acts as a moderator in the decision process for the subjects. See Table 4 for additional narrative regarding the superordinate theme of Financial Conditions of the subjects.

Table 3

Valued and Sense of Belonging

-
- P1 The lack of recognition, feeling valued and not having a sense of belonging is an issue in the organization. Black women don't naturally fit into this environment, so we have to work really hard to figure out this space. The President and CEO of my company had to call the head of the operations for me to get into that line of business. When he called, I was offered an opportunity that same day, and I delivered great results once I got the opportunity. I get fulfillment by what I do so my job needs to matter.
-
- P2 I realized that I don't fit their mold and I'm not going to, so they just have to redefine what they think we're like. And that's what carried me through. When I moved into a staff job, people would ask, well, how did you know that? And I thought, well, if you know why wouldn't I know? The real issue was people weren't expecting me to be smart because of who I am and what I look like. People just weren't happy about this sprinkling of Black women coming through the ranks.
-
- P3 You have to show your technical prowess and talk tech when you are in these training classes by asking the tough questions and showing your knowledge. It's definitely one of the things that for many years, I used to lead with trying to prove I was very technical, to the point where I got feedback that said, Wow, you're really technical. So now I know I had to reverse and show I had leadership skills, because I had so over indexed in trying to prove my technical worth, that I left off the leadership. If you think about making it to the SVP and above level, it's really the business acumen. So, we have to find the capacity to do both until the system normalizes and there are more women and people of color in these top technical roles that will relieve that pressure to show that we are technical enough.
-
- P4 I earned my seat at the table, and everybody knew it. I continued to deliver the results.
-
- P5 Let me get this straight. When I figure out how to solve a problem, you want me to tell you first, and then you tell the people? I knew that I wouldn't be in this department long. I had to figure out how to play the game. Especially when I was smarter than my boss. The people always figured it out and eventually I moved on. I still had a great experience.
-
- P6 I do think that Black females not advancing was an issue, you know, not having a path to advance, and not having a structure in which your accomplishments are visible and appreciated. I think that was a challenge for a lot of Black women and trying to figure out how to navigate to that next level, it was a challenge, for sure. And I do think women left positions because of that.
-
- P7 I think I fit into the culture in a few ways, one, I definitely show up as my authentic self, so loud and proud and kind of just straight, no chaser, just sharing the information, you know, as it needs to be shared, while also paying attention. I'm very self-aware to time and place and people that are like minded. And if I need to get something across the finish line, it doesn't matter to me, you know, what your race or your gender or any of that other stuff is? It's just, do you have the skills, do you understand, can I work with you, and trust you to get it across the finish line.

Table 4

Financial Conditions

P1	As a single parent, I had a household to support so I needed to be able to sustain the lifestyle.
P2	My success from a monetary standpoint, allowed me to make promises, and commit to those and deliver those promises to both my children, and also to support both my mom and both my sisters.
P3	As my career took off, we decided that my husband would become a stay-at-home husband, which was a very difficult decision for us culturally. But then I met more women that were similarly situated.
P4	I take care of my immediate family, my extended family, put my niece through college, and created a lifestyle of nice things and travel which I love!
P5	A single parent, put two children through college and I have traveled all over the world. I have two grandbabies and now I can afford to spend time with them. So, when they reorganized again, I thought about it and decided that I could afford to leave, so I left. I felt like it was time.
P6	We were driving in the car, and my son said, why are you doing all that running around and traveling and all that stuff. And I said so that you could have those \$200 tennis shoes on your feet. He looked at me and he goes, it's not worth it. I don't even want them. And he lives his life like that. I mean, he has a good job, and he works but he has choices. I'm glad because it's really not for everybody.
P7	What really keeps me here is that I have siblings, and my parents, are older. My siblings are ok but not focused on creating generational wealth. I want to make sure that my children and my parents are comfortable.

The Dynamics around the Decision to Stay or Leave

The data collected in the study and the three superordinate themes that emerged; support, value, and financial conditions show that Black women executives leave when they are not valued or supported as well as not experiencing a sense of connection within the organization. All of the subjects discussed leaving for better opportunities within corporate America when the conditions of support and value were not met. Two subjects changed companies but stayed within the corporate world. The decisions are moderated by the financial conditions for the subjects. Table 5 provides a sample narrative on the rationale for the decision to leave for the subjects in the study that exited corporate America early. Table 6 is the sample narrative for the subjects that decided to stay.

Table 5

Rationale for the Decision to Exit

P1 Went to work leading a nonprofit; left after reorganization

P2 Health Reasons; re-established priorities

P5 Left after reorganization and was ready financially to go

P6 Didn't want to climb higher in corporate; but wanted the challenge. Left after a reorganization and did consulting and work in academia.

Table 6

Rationale for the Decision to Stay

P3 Stayed for the people; and financial stability

P4 I love the job and the people; Financially stable, good lifestyle – Great mentor/sponsor

P7 Learned to play the game; Financial Stability – Great mentors and support

Discussion

The objective of this research paper was to understand why Black women executives are leaving corporate America before reaching the C-Suite through an exploratory phenomenological study. Corporate America is prematurely losing some of the diverse top talent to entrepreneurship, non-profit organizations or staying home because of the opportunity and the alternative of fighting through the organizational culture without the sense of belonging. Throughout the career of the Black women executive, she has endured being a Black woman in corporate America. This research suggests that the culture created by corporate executives has a big impact on the decision of would-be executives to remain on the executive career trajectory in corporate America. One of the subjects in the study sums it up well, “People don’t leave companies, they leave bosses.”

The three environmental factors that affected the career trajectory of Black women executives uncovered in this study are being supported within and external to the organization, experiencing a sense of belonging and feeling valued, and financial stability. These environmental factors that emerged from the Black women executives were also factors discussed in the extant literature; although the bulk of the existing literature focused on the retention of all women and their advancement in corporate America (e.g., Earle, 2003; Horowitz et al., 2003; Letchfield, 2022; Messmer, 2006; Oladapo, 2014). In addition to being supported and valued in the organization, the subjects emphasized their financial obligations to their immediate and extended families in the context of being the first in their families to cross the socio-economic boundaries to the level of wealth afforded by the senior level position in corporate America.

Another unique factor that emerged from the data is the strong bond of sisterhood felt among Black women senior executives within and external to the organization in which they serve. This particular form of support was extremely impactful and effective because of the ability to relate and connect around experiences that were understood by very few. The “sisterhood” allowed these Black women executives, who are normally isolated in their firms, to cultivate a powerful sense of belonging and connection.

These critical factors help to explain the dynamics around the decision to stay or leave corporate leadership positions on the part of Black women executives. It also speaks volumes about the organizations that create support for these high-level women to connect and the firms that support participation in groups like the Executive Leadership Council. When the executives were able to create a sense of community and belonging, feel supported and valued by the organization, they stay. Some enjoy the challenge of being a part of changing the culture, especially in HR, marketing, and procurement. When the support components are not in existence or being addressed, the Black women executive is more likely to opt out especially if she is in a financial position to do so.

The key element of support has a strong impact on the career decisions of executives to remain in their organizations (Messner, 2006; van Dam et. al., 2009). Potential retirees described how critical it was to obtain sponsorship early on in their career to ascend to the senior leadership level in the firm (van Dam et al., 2009). More specific to the findings of this study, research conducted by McKinsey (LeanIn, 2020) discussed the difficulty of obtaining sponsorship for the Black women in the corporate environment. Having an influential sponsor can lead to getting strategic assignments that will enable Black women executives to climb the ladder and excel beyond middle

management (Smith, 2021). The findings of this study concur, as the Black women executives interviewed here acknowledged that one of the vehicles through which they rose to the senior leadership positions was through the sponsorship from a white male.

The cultural history of Black women in America also impacts the stereotypes and perceptions of the leaders and how their interaction is received by corporate organizations. Given the small population of Black women executives in corporate America, her disposition is sometimes not familiar in the organization. This phenomenon was also noted by (Burns, 2021) in expressing her feelings before becoming the first Black women CEO, stating that the system is not designed with Black women in mind, so you have to learn how to maneuver without losing your authenticity and the technical capabilities for which you were hired. She also spoke about the feeling of being lost in affinity groups when they represented Black people, because the male issues were the priority and women groups where white women issues were the priority. Black women's voices have the potential to be lost when the dual bias of race and gender are ignored. Crenshaw's work on the conceptualization of the intersectionality theory further articulates this phenomenon arguing that the failure to simultaneously confront the hierarchies of gender and race could marginalize Black women and leave them invisible (Crenshaw, 1989). Relatedly, Alexander-Floyd (2018) coined the term "paradox of invisibility" in which Black women are hyper visible (especially when she is the only Black woman executive at the level) but at the same time their needs are invisible or not addressed in research and social policy. This could lead to frustration and feeling unheard or unvalued in the organization.

In the study, the subjects acknowledged the need to be able to bring their authentic selves to the workplace while still being accepted and valued. This is another key factor that impacts the decision to stay or go, the sense of belonging and feeling valued by the organization through being considered for strategic positions. This phenomenon was illustrated in (Horowitz et al., 2003), who showed that 83% of the impediments to retaining top talent is attributed to not receiving challenging work and assignments that impact the bottom line. Studies by (Earle, 2003; Oladapo, 2014 and Giscombe & Mathis, 2002) showed similar findings. The subjects in this study made it clear that they received the nod to get into senior leadership after either managing a crisis or successfully leading a team in strategic positions that directly impacted the bottom line. One participant described not being able to get into the operations organization until the CEO intervened because women did not traditionally lead the predominantly male operations organizations. However, it was clear that the operations leadership position was a critical step toward becoming a senior leader. The subjects also described the difficulty of landing strategic positions without the support of the informal networks that their peers had access to within the senior leader's circle of influence. When the executive felt unconnected to the organization or did not feel a sense of belonging in the culture, it clarified the decision to opt out when the opportunity presented itself.

In addition to environmental factors, family financial interests emerged as a factor impacting the decision to stay or go. This factor is becoming more consequential in the Black community as more Black Americans reach higher levels in their firms as the first generation to attain corporate senior leadership roles. In this study, a majority of the subjects spoke about the need to provide financial support to their extended family and

friends in addition to their immediate family. In some cases, navigating this new level of wealth brought along its own level of complexities and family dynamics. The subjects also adopted a corporate lifestyle, similar to their senior level colleagues, that ultimately impacted their financial stability. In some cases, when the conditions of support and value were not met, the executives in the study chose to stay due to financial obligations for themselves and their family, as well as support the enhanced lifestyle to which they had become accustomed. One participant talked about making the big decision for her husband to stay home, which was totally foreign to her culture, but that they had to adjust to meet the growing demands of her senior level position. Another participant described the importance of generating generational wealth since she was the first in the family to reach this level and be in a position to financially provide for her parents and children. A third participant mentioned her need to ensure that her family and extended family were well provided for before considering leaving the executive track for health issues. The perceived need to achieve financial wellness and security was a theme unanimous among study participants.

A conceptual framework that emerged from this study of Black women executives is offered in Figure 2. The Black women executive's decision to stay or go is highly impacted by the environmental factors of whether she is supported in the organization through mentorship and sponsorship from the leadership team along with a network of support external to the organization; whether or not the executive is able to experience the sense of belonging within the organization and a feeling of being valued by the organization, including the opportunity to do meaningful work in strategic assignments that impact the organization's bottom line; and the financial circumstances

that are present during the time of the decision. An executive could be ready to leave due to the lack of support, sense of belonging or feeling valued, but may decide to stay until her financials are in a more optimal position. The financial position of the executive at the time of the decision thus is a potential moderator in the relationship. Figure 2 is the diagrammatic representation of the potential conceptual model representing the findings of this first study.

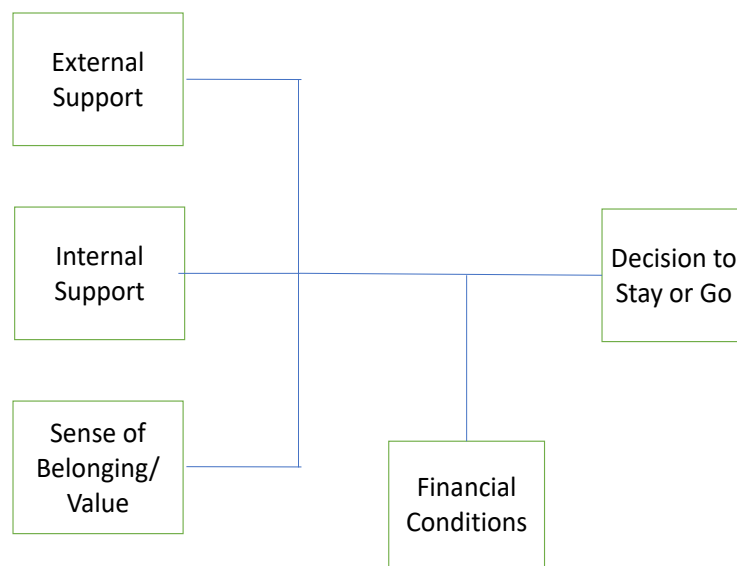


Figure 2. S1 Conceptual Framework

Limitations

The study has a few limitations as a result of the dynamics of a phenomenological study. The sample size is purposefully small because the focus is on gaining deeper knowledge of each participants lived experience. The small sample size precludes the findings from being generalized to the broader population. Also, given the nature of the in-depth exploration of the subject's lived experiences, the researcher's biases cannot totally be eliminated, and the historical recollection from the subjects' points of view

cannot be without bias due to their own experiences. The techniques explained within the study will limit the bias but not totally eliminate them, based on the dynamics of an interpretive phenomenological study. I consider this a small trade-off in exchange for the rich data gleaned from these lived experiences.

CHAPTER 4

STUDY TWO

Study One focused on the lived experiences of Black women senior executives either currently in executive roles or having served in an executive role and exited the corporate culture. The findings helped clarify the experiences of Black women executives in the corporate environment that could influence their decision to leave their career trajectory within corporate culture before getting to the C-Suite. The three superordinate themes that emerged from the rich data as factors included internal and external support, feeling valued by the organization or being compatible with the culture of the organization, and the financial circumstances and obligations surrounding the executive. Although the lived experiences of the subjects in the study provided rich data regarding the dynamics of the decision to stay or leave corporate positions at the senior level of the firm, a parallel concern arises related to what happens to the pipeline of Black women middle managers aspiring to senior leadership roles in the organization. The subjects spoke about some of their experiences leading up to the senior leader roles in corporate America which impacted their decision to leave once they were financially able to go. This created another concern about the Black women middle managers coming through the pipeline and the environmental experiences surrounding their journey.

The experiences of the senior executives that emerged from the rich data led me to question if the Black women middle managers still aspired to not only the C-Suite but to the senior executive levels of the business. The extant literature shows that women are promoted at a lesser degree than men, and Black women to an even lesser extent (e.g.,

Beckwith et al., 2016; Davis, 2016; Earle, 2003; Giscombe & Mattis, 2002; Horowitz et al., 2003; Smith, 2021). Recent statistics show that while 49% of entry-level positions are held by women, the percentage decreases to 38% at the managerial level (LeanIn.org, 2019). The pipeline of Black women being promoted to the executive ranks shrinks at the middle manager level, which is the feeder pool for the next generation of executive leaders. A factor cited by the McKinsey and company report is the “broken rung” phenomenon at the first critical step up to manager: “For every 100 men promoted to manager, only 58 Black women are promoted, despite the fact that Black women ask for promotions at the same rate as men” (LeanIn.Org, 2020, p. 6). Additionally, it is important to determine whether or not environmental conditions impact the middle managers aspiration to the senior leader positions. Further research in this area could inform the phenomenon of the downward spiral of not having enough Black women managers in the pipeline for senior leader positions, thereby exacerbating the probability that a Black women will have the opportunity to become a CEO of a Fortune 500 company. Given this phenomenon, the Black women middle manager could feel stuck or disillusioned about continuing the ascension to senior positions.

To better understand the dynamics of the decision of senior level Black women executives to stay or go, Study Two explored the dynamics of the middle manager level that appears to be decreasing in the pipeline to the C-suite. By focusing on middle management as the pipeline to the senior executive level and ultimately to the C-Suite, the second study provides additional insight into the experiences of Black women in the corporate environment early in their careers and at lower levels of management to better understand why they opt out once they get to the senior level. The study provided further

insight into the lived experiences of Black women directors and managers as they navigate the complexities of leading in Fortune 500 companies.

Pertinent to the experiences of Black women middle managers, there is a growing literature focusing on the phenomenon of microaggressions experienced by African Americans in the workplace (Beckwith et al., 2016; Lanier, 2005; LeanIn.Org, 2020; Linnabery, 2014; Meuser et al., 2016) as well as the construct of isolation experienced by the Black woman executive (Beckwith et al., 2016). These studies convey the experiences of being the only Black woman at their level in their firm and how they were treated differently than their male colleagues. Those experiences could detract from the sense of belonging; thus, this study also explores how microaggressions might impact the sense of belonging in the organization for Black women. Additionally, women who experience microaggressions are three times as likely to consider opting out of the corporate environment (LeanIn.Org and McKinsey & Company, 2015; LeanIn.Org, 2020). Hence, a better understanding of the experience of microaggressions among executive-aspirant Black women middle managers could support the need for belongingness and being valued that was uncovered in Study One.

In addition to the Black woman middle manager population, Study Two also explored Black women executive coaches who coach Black women corporate executives and could provide a unique perspective and insights into the plight of the Black woman's ascension to the C-Suite. The executive coaches brought a different perspective to the conversation around the challenges of the Black woman executive and the organization. The role of an executive coach is to facilitate the optimization of the executive's potential leadership performance and effectiveness through a process of asking strategic questions

and providing relevant guidance and tools to support the executive in gaining clarity around the entity's vision, mission, and execution of results. The executive coach focuses predominantly on the career of the coached individual as opposed to traditional leadership coaching, which focuses more on the leader's prescribed role in the organization. An executive coach emphasizes the dynamics around how the executive interacts with and is perceived by the organization. According to the International Coaching Federation (ICF), the world's largest and most recognized organization of professionally trained coaches, coaching is defined as the partnering with clients in a thought-provoking and creative process that inspires them to maximize their personal and professional potential. Often the coach will use various tools to assess how the client is perceived in the organization to be able to optimize the performance. However, depending on the nature of the circumstances, and the origin and owner of the coaching contract, the coach can also support the executive in safely exiting the organization.

Given the dynamics of the relationship between the executive coach and the Black woman executive, the executive coach is uniquely positioned to provide insights into the relationship between the Black woman senior executive and the organization, which could ultimately lead to a better understanding of what factors impact the executive's decision to stay or go. Expanding upon the semi-structured interviews undertaken in Study One, the inclusion of three Black women executive coaches led to additional insights for this research, elaborated upon in the results section of this study.

In sum, the overarching research question – Why are Black women executives leaving corporate America before reaching the C-Suite? – was further investigated by undertaking a second phenomenological study of the experiences of Black women middle

managers and Black women executive coaches. In particular, the theme uncovered in Study One that Black women executives need to feel valued and have a sense of belonging was more deeply explored by inquiring into the experiences of microaggression among these other groups.

Although the topic of microaggressions was only touched upon by participants in Study One, the middle managers and executive coaches were in a unique position to comment on the experience of microaggressions in corporations since they are interacting on a different level within the organization and observing and analyzing executives and their interactions within the organization respectively. Thus, the original research question was explored further through the lens of Black women middle managers and Black women executive coaches that coach Black women executives via an interpretative phenomenological study.

Research Methodology

To better understand the lived experiences of Black women executives deciding whether to leave or remain in senior level corporate positions, a qualitative study was conducted using the interpretive phenomenological methodology grounded in inductive reasoning. As stated in the limitations of the first study, one of the tradeoffs for the phenomenological study for the rich data is the purposively small sample size required to get to the in-depth experiences of each subject. However, because there are so few Black women executives, the in-depth interviews and resulting rich data is critical to lay the foundation for better understanding the experiences of the subjects. Once obtained, the data must be analyzed on the individual level, prior to deriving themes at the group level (Berber & Acar, 2021) This allows the researcher the opportunity to investigate the

smallest variations between subjects which could add to the understanding of the phenomenon being studied (Smith & Osborn, 2015). To add to the findings of Study One, Study Two explored the lived experiences of Black women middle managers who aspire to become a senior level executive as well as Black women executive coaches who are actively coaching Black women executives. Each subject who participated in the study has unique personal and organizational experiences, ready to be uncovered through the Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) methodology (Berber & Acar, 2021).

Data Collection

Study Two participants were identified through homogeneous purposive sampling, a sampling method typically used with phenomenological studies because the targeted population is a small closely defined group (Berber & Acar, 2021; Smith et al., 2009). The goal of this type of sampling is to concentrate on the specific resemblance of the participants and how it pertains to the subject of the research. The sample is normally drawn from people with similar demographics relating to the study which could include socio-economic status, race or ethnicity, job or life experiences, gender in a particular geography, culture, etc. (Etikan et al., 2016). The subjects for this study were recruited using the following methods: Solicitation of the researcher's professional networks created during tenure in the corporate world and Executive DBA colleagues by providing information about the study and the criteria for participation to identify potential volunteer participants. A flyer (see Appendix D) was also posted on LinkedIn to connect with subjects from different backgrounds that meet the criteria. This extended the group of subjects beyond the researcher's personal network to create another opportunity to reduce the self-biases in the study.

The sample for Study Two included five Black women middle managers and directors in Fortune 500 companies with at least five years of experience in a leadership role. Two participants currently serve in a senior director role, and three participants had decided to leave corporate America. Finally, three participants were International Coaching Federation certified or equivalent coaches who possess at minimum the equivalent of the Associate Certified Coach (ACC) credential. The additional credential is critical because it requires that the coach has at least 60 hours of training and at least 100 hours of experience, ensuring that they are current and relevant in the field of executive coaching. See Table 7 for detailed demographic data.

Semi Structured Interviews

Eight in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted using the Zoom platform. The researcher was alone in a personal office space which ensured privacy during the interviews. The interview protocol developed for Study One along with additional probing questions to explore the concept of feeling valued, the sense of belonging in an organization and exploring microaggressions, was used for the middle managers to deepen our understanding of the findings from Study One. Part I of the interview explored the background of the subject. Part II described the participants' corporate environment to further build the foundation to engage in a conversation about her personal experiences in corporate America. Part III focused on her experience as a Black woman in corporate America. Finally, Part IV dealt with the dynamics around the decision to stay on her career trajectory within corporate America or exit. Several prompts were used throughout the interview to further explore the experiences around feeling valued in the organization and the impact of microaggressions on individuals.

Table 7*S2 Demographics of Subjects.*

Subject	Age	Education	Title	Marital Status	Children	Exit or Stay
S2 BFL1	60+	B.A.	Senior Manager	M	Y	E
S2 BFL2	40+	M.S.	Executive Director	S	N	E
S2 BFL3	50+	M.S.	Senior Director	S	N	S
S2 BFL4	50+	Ed D	Director	M	Y	E
S2 BFL5	40+	MBA/ MS	Senior Director	M	Y	S
S2 EC1	50+	DBA, ICF	Executive Coach	M	Y	N/A
S2 EC2	50+	M.D., ICF	Executive Coach	D	Y	N/A
S2 EC3	70+	M.A., M.S.	Executive Coach	W	Y	N/A

The additional questions did lead to a deeper understanding of not only the subject's lived experiences but also how microaggressions and feeling valued impacted their performance and their decision to stay in the corporate world or leave. The interview protocol for the middle managers is detailed in Appendix E.

The intent of the in-depth semi structured interview with the executive coaches was to examine their experiences of working with Black women executives and the dynamics of their ability to assist with navigating through the organizational challenges. The coaches could provide a unique perspective on the experiences of the Black women executives and the notion of feeling valued within the organization. The coaches could also engage in a conversation around what the individual is experiencing in the organization compared to other Black women executives similarly situated. The

interviews did yield rich data that deepened the understanding of the Black women executives and raised additional questions about the experiences which will be detailed in the findings section of the paper. The interview protocol was modified for the executive coaches to gain the insight of the experiences. Part I explored the coach's background and work history. Part II explored the corporate culture in which their clients worked and their demographics to have context for the discussion. Part III focused on the experiences of the coach for Black women executives and middle managers. Finally, Part IV centered on the dynamic surrounding the decision to stay within or leave corporate America. Appendix F has additional details on the interview protocol for the executive coaches.

This approach for interviewing the different categories of participants in Study Two allowed for data to be captured from a different lens to get a clearer understanding of the dynamics involved with the decision to stay or exit the corporate environment. The interview questions built upon the foundation created in Study One. They were theoretically derived from and driven by Bohm's work (Bohm, 2004) focused on probing questions answering who, what, how, when, and why. The interviews ranged from 60 to 75 minutes with an average of 62 minutes. Otter.ai was used to develop transcripts of the interviews, which were imported into NVivo for manual coding and data analysis.

The additional interview questions were covered under the original IRB certificate of approval under the status of exempt review granted on January 13, 2023. The IRB certificate of approval is in Appendix B.

Reflexivity

Given the nature of a qualitative phenomenological study, it is very difficult to eliminate all biases from the researcher and the participant. This is especially the case

when the researcher has similar experiences as the subjects. To ensure that I remained focused on the subjects' world rather than an interpretation, and to further reduce the researcher's biases, a mirroring technique similar to that used in Study One was used during the interview process. (Myers & Newman, 2007). Bracketing was also practiced throughout the data collection and analysis to clearly hear the voices of the subjects (Chan et al., 2013). By using bracketing, the researcher can comprehend their own experiences without having them contaminate how they view and interpret the experiences under study.

In this study, I continued the use of field notes during the interview to note my feelings and continue to mirror what I hear when following up on questions. I also ensured that the interview transcriptions from Zoom were loaded directly into Otter.ai to ensure that the conversation was accurately captured before coding. To minimize the biases of the participants, I asked for examples of incidents or lessons that they used during their narrative to help clarify details of the experiences. See Appendices E and F for the interview protocols for the middle managers and executive coaches, respectively.

Data Analysis

The data analysis for a phenomenological study concentrates first on each case, and then on generating themes, to ensure that the individual experiences are captured for each participant as well as themes aggregated across the group (Braun & Clark, 2020). The data analysis delves deeply into the experiences of each subject, generating codes and themes for each case before moving on to generate themes and codes for all subjects. To guarantee that the actual lived experiences are recorded, the individual analysis concentrates on language, tone, and emotion (Smith et al., 2009).

The interview notes are organized and documented in a systematic manner. After a detailed analysis of the notes and codes, themes start to emerge, and for each category, superordinate themes are eventually identified that will serve as the basis for the research report. The process is repeated for each category after they have been examined and their experiences coded (Braun & Clark, 2020; Berber & Acar 2021; Smith & Osbourne, 2007). This approach provides the researcher another opportunity to reduce biases by focusing on each individual subject's language and emotion of the experience instead of inserting their own (Braun & Clark, 2021).

Findings

Study Two included eight subjects, five Black women middle managers who are currently in a Fortune 500 company or have been in the past, and three executive coaches who coach Black women executives. Individual and group level coding yielded 48 general codes, eight categories and three superordinate themes. The rich data collected showed that organizational and external support remained as critical components across all of the participants similar to Study One. The second superordinate theme was feeling valued. It helped to untangle the findings of feeling valued as derived from the data in Study One and fitting into the organization. The third theme that emerged is corporate ecosystem, which includes the categories of authenticity, microaggressions, and the cultural weight of being a Black woman in corporate America. Figure 3 shows the relationships of the codes, categories and themes that emerged from these interviews.

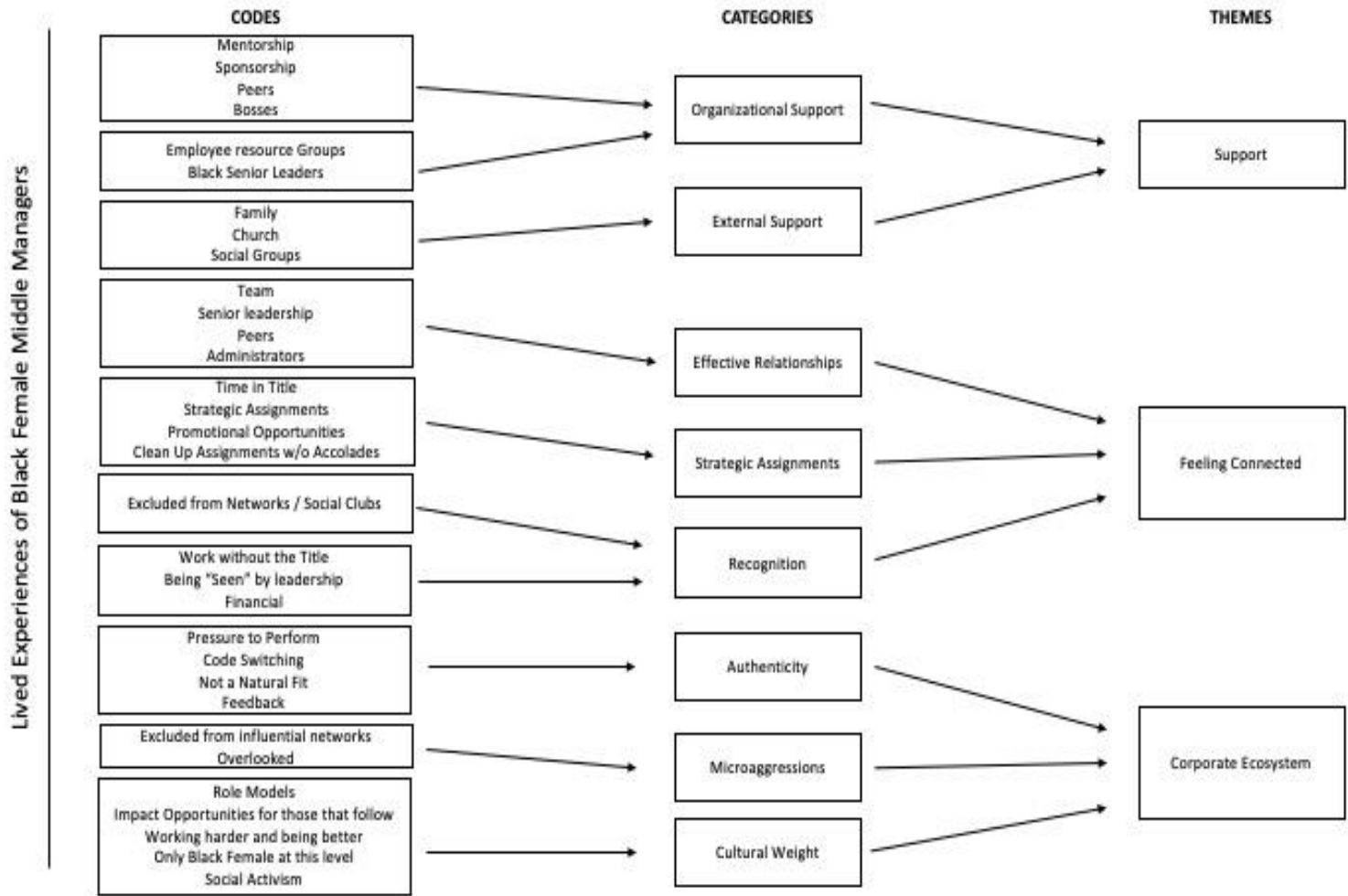


Figure 3. Lived Experiences of Black Women Middle Managers; Codes, Categories and Themes

Support

The findings showed that informal and formal mentorship and sponsorship relationships were all critical in helping women ascend into senior leadership positions. The participants each spoke of developing informal mentoring relationships within and external to their business for guidance. Three of the five candidates were aware of formal mentoring programs, but they were never included in the matching process. This is interesting since the five subjects were all considered to be succession planning candidates by their organizations and expected to continue to move up in their respective companies. The majority of their mentoring relationships formed from either a senior leader that took an interest in them or a boss that they formed a good relationship with that used his/ her influence to support their career.

Four of the five subjects were able to tap into the Black woman senior leader network that worked together with the African American Employee Resource group. The middle managers found the support from the Employee Resource groups instrumental in building their networks and developing healthy relationships across all levels in the business. Although the employee resource groups are helpful, they voiced a lack of concern for the support for Black women in leadership positions in the corporate environment. One subject discussed the need for a support group for Black women leaders to just focus on their challenges and to be able to bond with others in the same demographic position in the organization. The subjects discussed the implications of being both Black and a woman in a male-dominated organization. They also shared that this made it more difficult to cultivate relationships with potential mentors and sponsors.

Two of the five subjects emphasized the importance of having a white male mentor. One subject was invited into a mentoring program after 20 years of service, and she was assigned a white male mentor. She explained that the direct feedback that she receives from the mentor will help her achieve senior leadership level in time. The other subject was able to organically develop a relationship with her white male director, which was instrumental in helping her to navigate firm politics. She did not get to the senior leadership level because she took an early retirement and went into the programming functions of academia, where she serves as an executive director of procurement.

The subjects also emphasized the need for external support, speaking at length about receiving strength and support from their families, spirituality, and relationship with God. One subject indicated that she would not be able to endure the corporate experience without her spirituality and support from her church and social groups. She relayed the experiences of her and her family moving to an affluent area during a relocation and experiencing negative encounters with the police for the first time. She did not feel comfortable involving her leadership because it was a new position in which she was promoted to middle management, and she was the only Black woman at that level of leadership in a technical organization. The support of her family and her pastor helped her to endure the experiences until she was relocated to another state by the company several years later. The experience had a negative impact on her marriage and on her children. She was able to positively work through the issues with external support and restore the balance of her family once they moved to another environment. She was also very successful in her new position as the director of a technical organization.

The other subjects also indicated the importance of family support given the hours required when climbing the corporate ladder along with the emotional energy required. Only one subject was aware of the senior leader that was a sponsor for her. Ironically, she wasn't aware until she had left the company. Although they understood the importance of sponsorship, they were not able to secure it at the time of the interview. However, it was clear that they had some support at the senior leader level based on their opportunities and assignments during their careers. The data suggests that the subjects understand the need for internal and external support to achieve success in their business, which is aligned with the extant literature. The difficulty in securing sponsorship and support for Black women leaders should be studied in future research. Table 8 captures some of the narrative regarding support from the study participants.

Feeling Connected

The second superordinate theme uncovered in Study Two is feeling connected in the organization through creating effective relationships, obtaining strategic assignments that could lead to upward mobility in the organization, and recognition including financial, fair titles and inclusion in networks. Four of the five subjects discussed being able to build effective relationships within the organization with their peers, team members, and bosses as a critical component for feeling valued and feeling like they are an integral part of the organization. They each expressed that there was a "club like" environment that was difficult to gain entrance to within the culture. The implications of not being in the club was tied to not being able to move up in the business.

Table 8

Support

S2 BFL1	Within the company I had a couple of mentors. When I first started, I had a director, African American director who was very, very supportive. We had an informal mentoring relationship that we maintained for years. Mentoring and sponsorships are really important but hard to find. Especially, in corporate America, where you just deal with so many issues including racial challenges.
S2 BFL2	There were formal mentoring programs, but I don't know that it was accessible to everybody. The mentors that I specifically named were informal mentors, through different career assignments, I got the ability to get to know and work with them. There were employee resource groups that offered mentoring and then there were some executives that formed formal mentoring circles for support. I think it is especially critical for people of color, who may not have access
S2 BFL3	For the majority of my 25-year career, I heard that there were mentorship programs; but as I think about it, I was never really paired up with anybody. The mentors that I had, were created based on a former boss introducing me and we created a relationship. Recently, I'm participating in a leadership program with a mentorship component, and I was assigned to a white male mentor who I found to be extremely valuable. I'm very thankful for it. I wish that I had the transparency that I get from that person now. I think it's important for Black women to get white male mentors.
S2 BFL4	I had a white male manager who folks actually warned me about suggesting that he's racist and warned that, you gotta watch your back with him. And he was not. But you know, given the time to get to know him, he was actually one of my biggest proponents, and with his connections made sure to open some pathways to me.
S2 BFL4	Sister friend mentors, who were the folks that really kind of talked you through things are really critical, and I certainly had a lot of them within the company and outside the company,
S2 BFL5	I've had both sponsors and mentors, some mentors that started out are no longer with the business, but always are checking in on me to have a conversation just to make sure that I'm where I need to be and to continue to push me. I realized that my mentors had left the business, and people that were here, now, I may not necessarily have a relationship with, which meant that I needed to go back and build for lack of better words, my board of directors to strengthen my network again.

One subject expressed feeling like she had to work hard to get into any group. She understood the impact of developing personal relationships not just for advancement, but because when you work together daily, it does not feel good to feel like an outsider or not to fit into the group. Another subject discussed the importance of looking for other areas of commonality to build relationships and make connections within the organization. The subject in a technology organization discussed difficulty forming relationships with peers in a male dominated field where you had to continuously prove yourself. They each identified the importance of identifying a way to be included in the culture of the organization and social networks. Ultimately, they each expressed the need to be comfortable with being uncomfortable.

The thought of being accepted as a part of the organization or being connected provided a sense of being valued for the subjects. One of the examples from a subject in table eight below, summed up a feeling of being exhausted from just trying to be “seen”, and then accepted into the organization. Some of the same challenges were also expressed under the corporate ecosystem theme in the categories of authenticity and being the only Black woman at the table in an organization.

The opportunity to earn strategic assignments that ultimately lead to upward mobility was another way that the subjects expressed added to feeling valued or being connected to the organization. There was this notion of feeling like they had to be in a particular assignment or role longer than their peers when being considered for promotional opportunities. There were instances when they had to prove their competency, leadership, and work ethic over and over before being considered. There was a consistent theme of working above their level without the recognition or pay.

Although in some cases the recognition would eventually come years later, it created a feeling of being overlooked. Another example is a subject that performed her boss' job for almost a year on a temporary assignment, and when they offered her the work, it was without the pay or title. When she spoke to her boss, it appeared that he just hadn't considered paying her for the position. After the conversation, she was offered the position and pay. Although she was happy with the outcome, she still felt devalued since her leadership assumed that she would do the extra work without the recognition. Table 9 is an example of the narrative from the subjects on feeling connected in an organization.

Corporate Ecosystem

The third superordinate theme that emerged from the rich data is the context of the corporate ecosystem. Captured within this theme are felt authenticity, the experience of microaggressions, and the 'weight' or 'gravity' of the organizational culture. An organization can be described as a complex network of interconnected systems or people, or a community that interact with each other in a specific environment functioning together as a unit. As discussed in the previous theme, feeling connected, it is important for the individuals in the group to understand how they fit into the unit, and their role within the unit.

Table 9

Feeling Connected

S2 BFL1	We had a lot of challenges, When I look back there were several times where you could just see the unfair treatment. There were times where you're doing your job and your boss's job, and they're still not trying to promote you. And you can see peers that are getting positions that they aren't qualified to do.
S2 BFL1	You feel like you always have to be better than everybody else, you got to work harder. You have to prove yourself over and over again. It felt like every job I had, no matter how hard I worked in the last one it's like starting over. I feel like your counterparts, are talked up before they even get to the next place, and we are not. They are always given the benefit of the doubt, and we're not. You just carry a level of stress that you don't even always realize.
S2 BFL2	The leadership's actions told me inadvertently or on purpose, I don't know, that I wasn't really enough to be a leader, I was enough to train the leader, but I wasn't enough to be the leader. I left my corporate position, to go be the first Chief Communications Officer at a National nonprofit organization, and I was the first Black executive at that level in the organization.
S2 BFL2	Maybe this is somewhat on a part of my experiences with organizations, but I always felt like I didn't get to have a bad day. You know what I'm saying? Like I always had to be more than because it was going to be viewed differently. Or it may have kept someone else like me from getting that position. So, I always felt like some of my other colleagues who were not Black, they could be average. And it was okay. But it was never okay for me to be average. And I don't think that I always received the same grace as everybody else.
S2 BFL3	You have to do so much to really be seen that it's exhausting. After they finally see you, they say now let's see what you can do.
S2 BFL3	I've been in this title for 10 years. But I've seen people who know, a lot less than I do get promoted within a couple of years. And I think I'm a better leader. But then, the story that I'm hearing is, you might need to do another rotation or something like that. I think it's about not being a part of that group.
S2 BFL3	I felt valued. My boss told me that I was on the succession list, but every time available jobs came out, there this cohort of people. And I was not part of that group. So, after a while, I kept feeling like I was being overlooked.

Table 9

(continued)

S2 BFL3	It's almost like if you don't fit into the mold, like there's a club there's a club of people that that we know are going to be moving through the business and will wind up being the leaders. I don't think that I fit into that mold. Like, I feel like I've had to work harder to become part of somebody's group.
S2 BFL4	I've seen people with much less qualifications, in terms of years of experience, even formal education, that kind of got pushed along.
S2 BFL4	people are people, and there are many things that will bind us to one another, be it having children, or liking sports or cooking, or where you vacation, there's just so much that will be a common thread for humans, you know, throughout their lives, that you just have to really take the time to explore. And utilize that for the making connections, because you're not always going to be with your own peer group, and you have to be comfortable, being uncomfortable.
S2 BFL5	when I first came into the technology culture, I did not feel a part of it. I was at the table with mostly males and at other times the only Black person in the room. Initially coming into that organization, I didn't necessarily feel a part of, but I was intentional about getting to know people.

One of the components of being able to fit into the unit is being able to express oneself authentically or be true to oneself. The subjects expressed challenges with bringing their full authentic selves to work. One participant talked about the need for her hair to be straighter and longer to get a promotion. Although her hair was not directly impacting her performance, the focus on it impacted her confidence, which could ultimately impact performance. She also talked about the need to code switch to conform to the image that was expected at work. Not being able to be authentic creates an additional level of stress. The subject eventually left her corporate position as a leader and transitioned to the C-Suite of a national nonprofit organization. She indicated having to work hard to ignore the impact of microaggressions and reported being unable to be authentic in her new position or personal life. She expressed that the effects from her

corporate experience are long lasting when she does not work to deliberately manage them. Another subject reported changing her style of communication to create an environment for her team members to be able to get to know her better to build a culture of authenticity and connectivity since she understood its connection to the corporate environment. Instead of initially being more observant of the team and then participating, she felt like she needed to be more engaging up front to put the team at ease with her.

There was also significant discussion regarding additional pressures to perform in an organization when one is the only Black woman, i.e., having to represent a racial and gender category as opposed to simply representing yourself. One participant described the experience of being a Black woman as both rewarding and stressful: She noted that she always needed to do more and be better than her peers or risk negatively impacting opportunities for other Black women that came after her in the organization. There was also a sense of being a role model for other Black women since there were so few at that level in leadership. In addition to the pressure to perform, there was a discussion of the expectation of representing Black people during times of social unrest due to incidents in the community, which created additional stress and pressure. In this way, there seems to be an additional weight or pressure that not only comes from the organization, but the Black community as well when you are the only Black woman in the group.

Additionally, all of the subjects reported experiencing microaggressions throughout their careers. The data shows that although the microaggressions were tied to feeling valued and just being in the ecosystem of the corporate culture, the subjects in the study did not feel hindered by them and were careful not to allow them to impact their performance. However, due to the subtle nature of microaggressions, the impact could be

buried by other experiences and overcome by internal and external support. As the subjects spoke about some of the incidents, they could see how overtime the microaggressions could indirectly impact their performance and their personal lives. Interestingly, although the microaggressions were experienced by each of the Black women middle managers, the experiences of microaggressions did not directly correlate with the subjects feeling valued by the organization. There was more of an indirect relationship where the participants saw the microaggressions as something to overcome while not allowing the subtle behavior to impact their performance. The study results did however yield a deeper understanding of feeling valued and being accepted by the organization which will be discussed in detail in the findings section of this paper.

The category of microaggressions could fit with the theme of feeling valued or corporate ecosystem. It was grouped with the corporate ecosystem because the subjects spoke about it in the context of their interactions within the organization based on their identity. The two themes of 'feeling connected' and 'corporate ecosystems' are entangled and will be further discussed in the following Discussion section. Table 10 is an example of the narrative from the subjects on the impact of the corporate ecosystem.

Table 10

Corporate Ecosystem

S2 BFL1	You sometimes carry a lot of stress that you don't even realize. I'll never forget, leaving this one position. Every day, I get up to some new issue, it was a nightmare to work with. But you do what you got to do, and you deal with it, and you deal with it for a while. I left that job. We restructured and I picked up a different position. And I remember after a few months I thought, wow, I don't have any knots in my stomach. It's like I can breathe. Stress is what you are dealing with in some of these positions.
S2 BFL2	I had a supervisor who even told me that if I wanted to climb the corporate ladder, I needed to continue to wear my hair straight. And I needed to keep it long past my shoulders. And she wasn't coming from a place of being mean, she was genuinely trying to be helpful. Because in her 30 plus year career, someone had told her that, Afterwards, I'm not sure that I was always authentically me, because I was trying to be something to climb the ladder.
S2 BFL2	I always walked like in two spaces. Sometimes I would, you know, code switch. And so sometimes I wasn't authentically me, with everything. And I think because of the space that I was in being in corporate social responsibility and multicultural PR, I got to be a little bit more me than others. But I do think that there is a definite need. I definitely felt like I couldn't bring all of me right into corporate America.
S2 BFL3	Being a Black women executive has been rewarding. It's been stressful. And it's been stressful because I feel like I have the weight of Black America on my shoulders. Now, nobody's put it there. But just as a Black female, you already feel like you have to do 150%, you can't do 100. You got to be 150% to be average. That's stressful for anybody, you don't want to make a mistake, because I'm like, if I do something wrong, then that can negatively impact the opportunities for those people that are coming behind me. I also feel a responsibility to bring people up behind me.
S2 BFL3	I think that we get put in some of the hardest jobs when there is a crisis. We will get put there. And you get associated with the crisis. And you start putting structure to chaos. And then when it's like a breakthrough is about to happen, they might move somebody else in and that person gets the accolade So, you feel you can feel dejected. I've seen that happen
S2 BFL4	you very often were the only Black one in the room. Right? You have to be comfortable with it. And you also had to learn to build bridges based on other things then your race or where you grew up. And you know, the demographics that sort of naturally group people. So, being a Black woman in corporate America, it very much is a little bit of being comfortable, being uncomfortable. And you often have to pick and choose your battles. I have been in mixed company, many, many times where, you know, sometimes things are said, and you have to decide whether you're going to make it a teachable moment, or if you're gonna just let it roll. I have found for me personally, that sometimes the best way to confront people is to be non-confrontational.
S2 BFL5	I'm a person that observes to see who you are before I get to know you. I had to change. Even in that role. I had to be very authentic transparent with the team because three other people with operations background wanted this role. So, who the heck is she? And why is she, our leader. And so, I had to give them an opportunity to get to know who I was to build that culture and drive that authenticity and connectivity that was needed in that role. So again, as a leader, you've got to be able to adjust how you operate to make sure that you provide a sense of comfort, stability, and empathy for your team.

Executive Coaches

The narrative from the executive coaches helped to deepen the understanding of some of the interactions between the Black women leaders and the organizations. Some of the idiosyncrasies that Black women managers experience in corporate America do not really fit together. For example, one cannot separate the need to be a role model and feeling like one can't have a bad day from the feeling of having to perform better and work harder than everyone else. Each participant in the study spoke about needing to be better, work harder, etc., under the corporate ecosystem theme. The coaches realized that they have to help with those forces that are tangled together, they have to help their clients pull it apart to understand it and be able to work through it effectively to prevent premature burnout or health issues. It is important that the Black women leaders understand the difference between what they are bringing to the table as past trauma and what the organization is imposing upon them through disparate treatment and microaggressions. Although the idea of having to be better to succeed is common in the Black culture, and the participants may bring it to the workplace based on their previous success, the organization reinforces it with the microaggressions and disparate treatment. When a Black woman makes a mistake and the organization questions her competence and a white male makes the same mistake and it's accepted as a mistake, it inadvertently reinforces this notion of 'being better,' especially given the trauma that the Black woman persona has endured in corporate America. Awareness of this phenomenon is a foundational component for healing the organization and the individual. In sum, responses to the question, "Why Do Black Women Executives Leave Corporate America before Reaching the C-Suite?" produced three superordinate themes that emerged from the rich

data in this study: internal and external support, feeling connected, and the corporate ecosystem to help us to better understand the experiences that the Black women middle managers are experiencing that lead to the decision to continue to climb the corporate ladder, remain at the managerial level or leave the corporate environment for other opportunities. The reasons uncovered explain why Black women leave before getting to senior management or the C-Suite include getting prematurely burned out after experiencing some of the challenges of being a Black woman in the corporate environment including the microaggressions throughout her career, not feeling connected to the organization or valued by the organization, and not having solid sponsorship and support network. They also leave because of the opportunities external to the corporate world that do not have the same complexities as being a Black women in corporate America. The Black women leaders in the study left for various pursuits, including entrepreneurial interests, a career in academia, a C-Suite position in a national non-profit organization, and prioritizing family over work.

Discussion

The purpose of Study Two was to further explore the lived experiences of Black women managers and the dynamics surrounding the decision to continue on her career trajectory in corporate America or leave to pursue other interests. Three superordinate themes emerged from the rich data that are impactful to the decision. The experiences of the Black woman leader during the journey to senior leadership has a big influence on whether or not the individual will choose to stay and continue to ascend within the organization or leave. The first theme of having an internal and external support network is critical throughout the Black women's career. Each of the subjects described their

support networks in detail and attributed their success to having them in place. The internal support through formal and informal mentoring is critical to help navigate the political landscapes in the corporate culture.

This phenomenon is aligned with the extant literature that shows that support has a strong impact on an individual's career decision (Messner, 2006; van Dam et al., 2009). When working through the dynamics to ascend into the senior leadership ranks and ultimately the C-Suite, support through sponsorship becomes even more crucial to the individual's success. Although each of the subjects talked about needing a sponsor it was clear that they had a difficult time identifying one, except for the subject that was made aware of the sponsor after leaving the business. The difficulty of Black women identifying a sponsor is consistent with the extant literature that points to the difficulty of sponsors lending their influence on behalf of Black women in leadership positions. Although this advocacy is crucial to move up in the corporate culture, it is difficult for Black women to identify sponsorship and advocacy relationships within corporate America (Giscombe & Mattis, 2002; LeanIn.Org and McKinsey & Company, 2019). Given the small numbers of Black women leaders, the sponsor could feel that his decisions are also put under a microscope and scrutinized similar to the feeling that Black women need to overcome daily (Lean In, 2020; Smith, 2021). The issue of the lack of sponsorship for Black women will need to be further understood and addressed for more Black women leaders to ascend to the C-Suite in Fortune 500 companies.

Study Two also uncovered additional weight underpinning the concept of feeling valued in an effort to untangle it from the concept of being connected or loyal to the organization. The subjects reported feeling connected to the organization when they were

able to successfully build strategic relationships with their peers, subordinates, and senior leaders in the business. Given the amount of time one spends at work in corporate jobs, it is important to build relationships that are deeper than superficial interactions to feel connected, and not feel like you are on the outside of the organization. One of the subjects spoke about the need for a resource group for Black women senior leaders to connect, bond and share experiences to avoid feeling left out of the organization. She expressed not fully fitting in the corporate woman box or the Black in corporate America box. This phenomenon is aligned with the literature in regard to Black women having the potential to be marginalized when the dual bias of race and engender is ignored. This is reflected in Crenshaw's work on intersectionality (Crenshaw K., 1989), which explores the conflation of gender and race and how Black women are overlooked when they are put in the box of either Black or female. When grouped with Black people, their challenges are overshadowed by Black male issues; when grouped with women, they get overshadowed by white women's challenges and issues.

The issue of "fitting in" is also important, given the corporate dynamic of how senior leaders interact and are selected, to have a powerful network that really know you and your capabilities to be able to move ahead in the business. The subjects expressed concern about being on the outside of "the club" because they understood the impact it would have on their careers if they did not "join" it. For example, Ursula Burns, the first Black women CEO of a Fortune 500 company, "I'm in the CEO club, but I'll never be a part of it" (Burns U., 2021). She went on to express some of the cultural differences that made it a difficult fit, discussing how corporate America was created by white men for white men. She was not criticizing it as much as acknowledging that Fortune 500

companies were not designed with Black women leaders in mind, so you have to work really hard to continue to show up authentically, do the job, and provide the benefits that diverse workforces promise to deliver.

Access to “the club” was also vital in landing the strategic assignments required to reach senior leadership positions and ultimately the C-Suite. Each of the subjects talked about an experience where they were either overlooked for a promotion or they performed the job of a higher title without the recognition and the associated compensation. There was a common experience of being called in to do an assignment that required change, a crisis, or dealing with difficult employees but somehow being moved to another assignment after getting a plan in motion right before it was time for the recognition or accolades. One of the subjects referred to it as “clean-up” work. The subjects all understood the opportunity and felt pressure to ensure that they landed assignments in the critical operations of the organization and not the staff and support groups if they wanted to have the visibility required to move up. This also shows why having a credible, influential sponsor is so critical in the corporate culture (Giscombe & Mattis, 2002; LeanIn.org and McKinsey & Company, 2019). Another form of recognition that would support the subjects feeling valuable to the organization is the inclusion in informal social networks, where the strategic relationships are established and, in some cases, decisions are made. The issue of Black women being excluded from informal networks in the corporate culture was discussed in Anderson’s work as a factor that could lead to reduced visibility and promotional opportunities which could ultimately impact the Black woman’s performance and decision whether to stay in corporate America or exit (Anderson, 2011).

The third superordinate theme that emerged from the data is the context from the corporate ecosystem. The two themes Feeling Connected and Corporate Ecosystem are entangled: One feeds into the other and can reinforce behavior in both a positive and negative sense. For example, it is difficult to decouple the notion of the need to work harder and be better from the consequence of not being ‘seen’ by the organization or getting the pay or title from the work performed. If a Black woman does not feel valued and connected to the organization, it drives her need to continue to overcompensate just to be seen and become a candidate for the strategic positions. However, the corporate ecosystem stands alone as a theme because it captures other facets of the interaction between Black women and the organization. The theme is comprised of the ways that the organization fosters felt authenticity, experienced microaggressions and the cultural weight of the organization that is experienced by the Black woman middle manager.

Additionally, the subjects discussed the need to be able to be authentic at work. In one narrative, the subject was coached not to wear her authentic hair in spite of the fact that that it did not impact her performance. Another subject discussed code switching because she didn’t feel like she fit into the corporate culture although she was confident in delivering her results. The notion of felt authenticity can be understood using Goffman’s (1959) theatrical metaphor of how you show up in organizations as the “front stage” and your private thoughts and inner self as the “backstage”; authenticity can be viewed as the two being in alignment. When the subjects are trying to conform or fit in to the organization, it could cause a misalignment between the two, allowing the subjects to only share their “front stage” selves with the organization.

When the subjects are in an environment where they experience microaggressions, it further exacerbates the issues around their ability to be authentic. The subjects conveyed multiple instances of experiencing microaggressions in the workplace but did not feel that they allowed it to directly impact their performance. However, they did indicate that, over time, the microaggressions did contribute to their feeling of exhaustion. Black women are indeed more likely to experience microaggressions in the workplace than their peers, and women who are subjected to microaggressions are three times more likely to consider leaving the corporate culture. (LeanIn.Org and McKinsey & Company, 2015; LeanIn.Org, 2020). The examples that the subjects provided are a part of the corporate ecosystem that begin to illustrate why some Black women choose to leave: feeling mentally exhausted, being the only Black woman in the room at her level in the organization.

Another aspect of the corporate ecosystem that emerged from the rich data was participants' feeling the cultural weight of the organization. The subjects described it as having the weight of the culture on their shoulders once they succeeded. It was not necessarily described as negative, but it was viewed as adding to the pressure to perform and not to make a mistake for the fear of taking an opportunity from someone in the future. Black women feeling the need to work harder and be better than their peers in the corporate culture adds additional pressure and stress. Although some of the pressures felt by Black women stems from felt trauma in the Black community, it is fed by the organization when there is disparate treatment or microaggressions present in the workplace. The notion of needing to be better and work harder exists more broadly in the Black community as well as within other minority groups (James et al., 1992). In the

mid-1980s, James et al. (1992) coined the term “John Henryism” to capture the positive of helping minority groups be more effective and the negative of the physical and mental toll it takes on minorities. Thus, these subtle acts of constantly feeling the need to prove oneself have a strong impact on the Black woman’s health and drive to continue to work harder and be better.

This makes it even more critical to figure out how the Black woman middle managers can feel more valued by and connected to the organization. Feeling isolated and unsupported by the organization is the antithesis of feeling valued or connected. It is untenable to distinguish the notion of working harder and being better, being authentic, being seen as a role model and being expected to speak on behalf of the Black culture from not feeling valued or connected due to the lack of recognition with pay or the formal title of a position. These behaviors must be untangled and further understood to facilitate an environment for Black women leaders to choose to stay.

A possible conceptual framework for Study Two that emerged from the rich data of the lived experiences of the Black woman middle manager is captured in Figure 4, below. The Black woman middle manager’s decision to continue to climb the corporate ladder, stay in the ranks of middle management or exit the corporate world is highly impacted by having the necessary organizational and external support, feeling a sense of connection with, and feeling like a valued contributor to the organization, and being able to endure the context of corporate ecosystem that is driven by being a Black woman in corporate America. The theme of feeling a sense of connection is critical because it can counteract some of the forces and factors that are experienced in the corporate ecosystem that could lead to additional pressure to perform and not being able to show up

authentically in the workplace. The financial position of the Black woman middle manager has a moderating effect on the relationship and could supersede the effects of feeling valued if she determines that she isn't financially stable enough to leave.

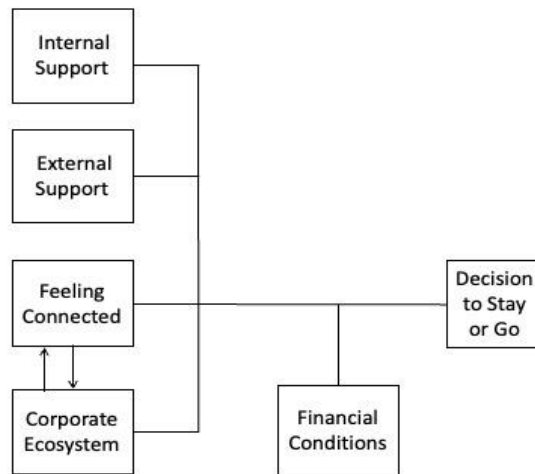


Figure 4. S2 Conceptual Framework

Limitations

The study has a few limitations as a result of the nature of a phenomenological study. The purposely small sample size enables the researcher to get in-depth with each subject which yields rich data but precludes the research findings from being generalized. Although the subjects may be authentically conveying their lived experiences, the narrative is somewhat biased based on the filter created from those very lived experiences. The researcher's biases can be minimized by the strategies defined in the methodology but could not be totally eliminated.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

Given the very few Black women in the C-Suites of corporations and at executive levels, there is limited information about why they are underrepresented and how their experiences may contribute to their leaving before reaching said levels. Over two studies, this research uses a qualitative interpretative phenomenological methodology to explore why Black women corporate leaders in U.S. companies are leaving corporate America at the executive ranks before reaching the C-Suite. Study One included Black women executives at the VP and above level in U.S. based Fortune 500 companies. Three superordinate themes emerged from the data in response to the research question of why Black women executives are leaving corporate America before reaching the C-Suite; the lack of support, the lack of feeling valued or a sense of belonging and achieving enough wealth to consider an early exit. Study Two was conducted with Black women middle managers to further explore and detangle some of the themes from Study One and understand the experiences of the Black women leaders in the pipeline for senior management in U.S. companies.

The findings lay the foundation for understanding the impact of the corporate environment in the loss of top diverse talent for this understudied demographic in U.S. Fortune 500 companies. Considering data from the entirety of Study One and Study Two samples provided the opportunity to understand more deeply the lived experiences of the three different groups who have the experience of being a Black woman invested in corporate America. The findings of Study Two offered a more discerning interpretation

of the Study One findings on the theme of being valued by the organization. Study Two revealed that the perception of being valued by the organization was indicative of feeling connected and feeling loyal to the organization as opposed to feeling personally valued. Feeling valued by the organization appears to be distinct from feeling part of and loyal to an organization, which is not assured by simply being in an organization. Thus, the findings from Study Two enhanced the understanding of the themes and categories unveiled in Study One. The middle managers and executive coaches offered a more granular look at some of the concepts uncovered in Study One.

It should be noted that the research findings discussed in this paper are applicable to the Black women in the United States due to the parameters of the study. This does not preclude the findings from being applicable to other minority groups including the broader category of women. However, some of the findings like the increased likelihood of experiencing microaggressions pertain to Black women in the corporate culture. The LeanIn.Org study (2020) found that since Black women are subjected to both racism and sexism, they are the targets of more microaggressions than other women. There is also the issue of ethnic hair in the corporate culture. One of the subjects in Study 2 conveyed an experience where she was told that she needed to try to straighten her hair and grow it past her shoulders to get promoted in the corporate culture. The issue of ethnic hair is so exaggerated that a law was recently passed preventing discrimination based on ethnic hair styles. Dr. Crenshaw's (1989) work on intersectionality also speaks to the potential of marginalization of Black women due to the dual bias of race and gender.

The findings from Study 1 and Study 2, taken together, offer a preliminary conceptualization of the factors that enable and pose obstacles to Black women potential

executives as they navigate a path to the C-suite in U.S. corporations. This conceptualization is captured in Figure 5.

	Enablers	Obstacles
Internal Organization Factors	<p>Organization Support</p> <p>Strategic Work Assignments</p> <p>Meaningful Recognition</p> <p>Positive Environment</p>	<p>Inability to be Authentic</p> <p>Work Without the Title</p> <p>Lack of Recognition</p> <p>Corporate Environment</p> <p>Exclusion from Critical Networks</p>
External Organization Factors	<p>Personal Support</p> <p>Immediate Family Support</p> <p>Financial Stability</p> <p>Extended Family Financial Obligations</p>	<p>Immediate Family Conflict</p> <p>Financial Obligation of 1st Generation Executives</p> <p>Cultural Weight of Being the Only Black Female</p>

Figure 5. Enablers and Obstacles for Black Women Executives

Organizational Enablers

Subjects in both studies emphasized the need for mentors and sponsors to be successful in climbing the corporate ladder to senior management positions and ultimately the C-Suite. They emphasized the informal mentoring relationships that they were able to grow during their tenure in the corporate world. They also highlighted difficulty attaining a sponsor, which is aligned with the extant literature (Lean In, 2020; Smith, 2021). It is clear from the research and the extant literature that sponsorship is one of the biggest enablers for executives to get to the senior leader levels and opt to stay once this level of success has been achieved.

Attaining strategic assignments that enable upward mobility also emerged from the rich data as a requirement to stay, but also as a form of recognition. The subjects from both studies discussed the importance of getting the positions that impacted the bottom line of the core business. In Study One, one participant reported having to go to the CEO to be able to land one a highly sought-after operational leadership position that was critical to upward mobility. Subjects in both studies emphasized the need for the strategic assignments for upward mobility and ultimately to be positioned for the C-Suite. Moreover, while strategic assignments are critical, it is also important to receive appropriate recognition through the associated title and equivalent pay. Organizational support, obtaining strategic work assignments and meaningful recognition, support the creation of a more positive work environment which is required for the Black woman leader to choose to stay and ascend the corporate ladder to higher levels of leadership.

External Enablers

Subjects in both studies described the importance of having an external support network. Immediate family support was crucial for the senior executives and middle managers due to the demands of the job and the emotional strains of the corporate culture on the Black woman. Several subjects shared the difficulty of the decision for their partners to stay home and have a more primary role with their children. This was very challenging since it was so rare in the Black community, and the trauma that remained from previous stereotypes of Black men. However, the support enabled them to be successful in corporate America along with keeping a healthy family dynamic. Ursula Burns, the first Black woman CEO of a Fortune 500 company discussed deciding to go home to her family instead of golfing although she understood the political impacts of

bonding with her peers. She understood that she did not have a lot in common with her peers other than her position (Burns, 2021). This made the support of her family and outside organizations like the Executive Leadership Council (ELC), an organization of Black CEOs and senior executives at Fortune 1000 and Global 500 companies dedicated to building a more inclusive business leadership pipeline, even more critical for her success. The Black women middle managers shared similar experiences about support from the Employee Resource Groups (ERGs) supported by their company. In several cases, the ERG organizations were instrumental in the subjects being able to secure informal mentoring and sponsor relationships.

The subjects in both studies shared their concerns around financial stability since most of the subjects were first generation corporate leaders and provided some financial support to their extended families. The decision to stay or leave was impacted by the notion of being a role model in the family in addition to the financial support. The financial stability of the leader emerged as a moderating effect in both studies.

Organizational Obstacles

The organizational obstacles for the senior executives involved not feeling valued or connected to the organization and bearing too much of the cultural weight. The idea of being able to bring one's authentic self to the workplace is tied to the theme of feeling connected. The participants each shared feeling emotional and physical challenges with allowing their authenticity to shine through in the corporate culture. However, the executives who decided to stay figured out how to strike a balance so that they could feel good about how they were showing up. It becomes an obstacle when one feels like they

are not connecting with the organization resulting in not being comfortable sharing one's authentic self.

The challenge of not feeling appropriately recognized is also entangled with working without the title or compensation, or both. When the work that the Black woman leader is performing is not recognized, it could lead to feeling disconnected with the organization or not feeling valued by the organization. This could also lead to feelings of isolation by the leader which also impacts the decision to stay or exit the corporate culture. The subjects in both studies reported feeling isolated in some cases and being the only Black woman at their level in the organization. Being the only one, sometimes made it difficult to gain access to some of the social circles that they termed "the club", which were making the decisions about the strategic assignments and succession planning for the senior leadership positions.

External Obstacles

One external factor identified as an obstacle for Black woman leaders is the bearing of cultural weight within the organization. A majority of subjects across both studies reported being the first generation in their families to achieve their leadership level of success in corporate America. Although this is celebrated, it also brings with it additional pressure to succeed; when it is coupled with being the only Black woman of their status in the firm, the pressure is further multiplied. The subjects shared experiences of feeling obligated not to make a single mistake because they were role models for their communities. They also shared the uncomfortable position of being expected to speak for all Black people during times of social unrest in the community. When one is singled out during these times, it adds to the feeling of being disconnected from the organization at a

time when one needs the support the most. One example that was shared was how decisions for returning to work were made during the pandemic. This participant noted that everyone around the table were white males, and they initially were not empathizing with the challenges of mothers or other primary caregivers. Although they worked through it in a positive manner, she noted that she was careful to not fall into the role of the female voice.

Another subject conveyed her concern about the assignment of stereotypical female roles once she was promoted beyond her partner's level. The issue of having the difficult discussion about who would need to have primary care for the household versus being the one to continue to accelerate their career. Family dynamics can become an obstacle when the harmony inside the family gets disrupted by power differentials. Another participant relayed her experience regarding her corporate relocation to an affluent area in a different state, a place where her Black husband was frequently stopped by the police. This situation placed a tremendous strain on her family dynamic and on her emotionally while she was transitioning into a middle manager position. Although these external obstacles can be overcome, they present additional pressures for the Black woman leader along with the pressures within the organization.

Expected Contributions

Black women middle managers and senior executives in U.S. corporations are often alone at their level within corporations. This could result in unique challenges that are not understood by organizations or their fellow executives. The results of this study will lead to a better understanding of the lived experiences of Black women executives in U.S. Fortune 500 companies that results in them leaving their leadership positions in

corporate America and middle management managers that opt out resulting in a decreased pipeline for senior leadership positions. There appears to be a positive correlation between the Black women executives' experiences in this study and the sense of being supported and valued within the organization. When the subjects were able to identify with being supported and valued by the organization, they tended to stay on track. Once the support or value was no longer demonstrated for various reasons, it was easier to leave once the financial conditions were reasonable to sustain their desired lifestyle. It is critical to ensure that tools are identified to support the Black women executives in the firm to offset the impact of the experiences in the organization. This could ultimately lead to a reduction in the loss of top talent in corporate positions. This research will add to the research surrounding retaining top talent in U.S. Fortune 500 corporations within the organization by being inclusive of Black women. Through a better understanding of the lived experiences of these talented executive Black women that opt out, strategies could be explored and developed to improve retention rates of Black women executives in U.S. Fortune 500 companies. The sharing of the narrative is also very powerful and empowering to the Black women executives that are currently in the position, feeling isolated because they are "the only one."

Future research could utilize these results to develop strategies for retention for other categories of minorities within the executive ranks who may have similar experiences, including all women and other people or women of color. Another research topic of interest could be a deeper dive into the notion of organization support to identify strategies to help Black women leaders connect with sponsors in the workplace in U.S. Fortune 500 corporations. This research was a phenomenological study aimed at

understanding this phenomenon from the Black woman's perspective, in U.S. Fortune 500 corporations. There is also value in exploring this topic from the perspective of the organization, specifically understanding why more Black women leaders are not being selected for senior management and C-Suite positions. This would allow the voices of the establishment and the power brokers to be heard which could further inform this research. This would allow white male senior leaders to speak to their perception of why there are not more Black women senior leaders in the C-Suite in U.S. Fortune 500 corporations.

Practical Applications

The findings for the study can be incorporated into corporate human resource diversity policies where appropriate to account for the dual biases of race and gender for this underrepresented demographic in the organization. Most importantly, this body of work can be used when coaching Black women executives, in U.S. Fortune 500 corporations, with regards to understanding the dynamics associated with the "John Henryism" effect for themselves and when leading or mentoring other minority employees. It's also a good tool for Black women leaders to see that some of the experiences that they are having is based on the dynamics of being a Black woman leader in corporate America and they are not alone. This research could be used as a tool to start the conversation and create awareness of the impact of the intersection of race and gender in the corporate culture. One could also further explore the complexities of the intersection of the Africa Diaspora and the corporate culture in U.S. Fortune 500 companies, to better understand the impact to the organization as well as the individual.

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APPENDIX A

RECRUITMENT FLYER FOR STUDY ONE



Volunteer Research Study



SEEKING PARTICIPANTS

DEAR VOLUNTEERS

I am currently a doctoral student at Temple University's Fox School of Business. I am conducting research regarding the experiences of black female executives in senior leadership positions in Fortune 500 companies of corporate America. I am seeking volunteers to participate in the study. Participation will include a semi structured, recorded interview on Zoom that will take approximately 60 minutes.

PLEASE NOTE:

1. The interview questions will be approved by the **Institutional Review Board** in advance of your participation.
2. The identities of all participants and associated **confidential information will be protected**. The names and data provided will be housed separately in password protected files.

PARTICIPANT CRITERIA

Self- identified Black female executives (VP and above) serving or who have served in Fortune 500 companies.

If you are interested in participating, contact Michelle Dutton at Michelle.Brown0004@temple.edu. Please feel free to share this information with anyone you feel would be interested in this research and fits the criteria. Thank you for your help!

MICHELLE BROWN DUTTON

APPENDIX B

IRB CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL



Research Integrity & Compliance
Student Faculty Center
3340 N. Broad Street, Suite 304
Philadelphia PA 19140

Institutional Review Board
Phone: (215) 707-3390
Fax: (215) 204-4609
e-mail: irb@temple.edu



Approval for a Project Involving Human Subjects Research that is Approved as Exempt

Date: 13-Jan-2023

Protocol Number: 30230
PI: LYNNE ANDERSSON
Review Type: EXEMPT
Approved On: 13-Jan-2023
Risk: Minimal risk
Committee: A2
Sponsor: NO EXTERNAL SPONSOR
Project Title: Why are black female executives leaving corporate America before reaching the C-Suite?

The IRB approved the protocol 30230.

The study was approved under Exempt review. The IRB determined that the research **does not require a continuing review**, consequently there is not an IRB approval period.

As this research was approved as Exempt, the IRB will not stamp the consent or assent form(s).

Note that all applicable Institutional approvals must also be secured before study implementation. These approvals include, but are not limited to, Medical Radiation Committee ("MRC"); Radiation Safety Committee ("RSC"); Institutional Biosafety Committee ("IBC"); and Temple University Survey Coordinating Committee ("TUSCC"). Please visit these Committees' websites for further information.

Finally, in conducting this research, you are obligated to submit the following:

- **Amendments - Any changes to the research that may change the Exempt status of this study must be reviewed and approved by the IRB prior to implementation.** Examples of such changes are: including new, sensitive questions to a survey or interview, changing data collection such that de-identified data will now be identifiable, including an intervention in the methods, changing variables to be collected from medical charts, decreasing confidentiality measures, including minors or adults lacking capacity to consent as subjects when previously only adults with capacity to consent were to be enrolled, no longer collecting signed HIPAA Authorization, etc. Please reach out to the IRB Staff with any questions about if a change to the study warrants an Amendment.
- **Reportable New Information** - Using the Reportable New Information e-form, report new information items such as those described in HRP-071 Policy - Prompt Reporting Requirements to the IRB **within 5 days**.
- **Closure report** - Using a closure e-form, submit when the study is permanently closed to enrollment; all subjects have completed all protocol related interventions and interactions; collection of private identifiable information is complete; and analysis of private identifiable information is complete.

For the complete list of investigator responsibilities, please see the HRP-070 Policy – Investigator Obligations, the Investigator Manual (HRP-910), and other Policies and Procedures found on the Temple University IRB website: <https://research.temple.edu/irb-forms-standard-operating-procedures>.

Please contact the IRB at (215) 707-3390 if you have any questions.

APPENDIX C

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL FOR STUDY ONE

The interview is structured in four parts, Part I starts with exploring your background and definition of success, in Part II we will discuss your corporate environment to finish getting the context of your experiences, and Part III will ask about your experience as a Black female and then close with Part IV which is about gaining an understanding of the dynamics around the decision to stay in or go.

Part I, Exploring your background and definition of success

Let's start with telling me a little about yourself and your background.

(please provide a wholistic view of who you are, upbringing, family, etc.)

To what extent do you feel like you have achieved success?

If the subject expresses that she feels successful continue... otherwise jump to the C.

prompt

a.) What led you on your path to success? Explore support and sense of belonging for the middle managers

b.) Given your level of success, please describe your role models, mentors and/ or sponsors within and external to your organization throughout your career

Only if the subject has expressed not feeling successful will the c. prompt be used

c.) What hindered you from maximizing your success?

Did you feel comfortable enough to be candid with me about how you feel about your success?

Part II Exploring your corporate environment

How would you describe the corporate cultures that you have experienced?

How did you fit within those cultures or organizations?

Ask about being candid if it feels like a packaged answer

Tell me about a lesson that you share with people that you mentor in the workplace based on your experiences.

Can you talk about the event or incident that led to the lesson?

What actually leads to feeling a sense of belonging within the organization, or not feeling the sense of belonging? Do you think that it's important?

Part III Exploring your experience as a black women

What has it been like for you to be a Black woman executive in corporate America?

(Prompts to better understand the lived experiences of Black Women Executives could include questions on the following if not already covered

work/ life demands,

treatment regarding promotions or job placement

Facts that are considered when deciding to stay or leave corporate America (based on Participant responses)

Part IV Exploring the decision to stay or go

What led to your departure of your trajectory in corporate America?

What is driving your decision to continue your career trajectory in corporate America?

General Wrap Up

Is there anything that you would like to add about your experiences before we conclude your interview?

Thank you for your time and your candid answers. Now that you have gone through the experience, is there anyone else that you would like to see included in this research?

Thanks again for participating in this critical work.

APPENDIX D

RECRUITMENT FLYER FOR STUDY TWO



Volunteer Research Study



SEEKING PARTICIPANTS

DEAR VOLUNTEERS

I am currently a doctoral student at Temple University's Fox School of Business. I am conducting research regarding the experiences of black female Managers or Directors at Fortune 500 companies; and ICF certified Executive Coaches. I am seeking volunteers to participate in the study. Participation will include a semi structured, recorded interview on Zoom that will take approximately 60 minutes.

PLEASE NOTE:

1. The interview questions have been approved by **Temple University's Institutional Review Board (IRB)** in advance of your participation.
2. The identities of all participants and associated **confidential information will be protected**. The names and data provided will be housed separately in password-protected files.

PARTICIPANT CRITERIA

Self- identified Black female Managers or Directors serving or who have served in Fortune 500 companies

ICF certified Black Female Executive Coaches that have the PCC credential and have experience coaching Black Female Executives

If you are interested in participating, contact Michelle Brown Dutton at Michelle.Brown0004@temple.edu. Please feel free to share this information with anyone you feel would be interested in this research and fits the criteria. Thank you for your help!

MICHELLE BROWN DUTTON

APPENDIX E

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL FOR STUDY TWO MIDDLE MANAGERS

The interview is structured in four parts, Part I starts with exploring your background and definition of success, in Part II we will discuss your corporate environment to finish getting the context of your experiences, and Part III will ask about your experience as a black woman and then close with Part IV which is about gaining an understanding of the dynamics around the decision to stay in or go.

Part I, Exploring your background and definition of success

Let's start with telling me a little about yourself and your background.

(please provide a wholistic view of who you are, upbringing, family, etc.)

To what extent do you feel like you have achieved success?

If the subject expresses that she feels successful continue... otherwise jump to the C. prompt

- a.) What led you on your path to success?
- b.) Given your level of success, please describe your role models, mentors and/ or sponsors within and external to your organization throughout your career

(Probe a little deeper for internal and external support)

Only if the subject has expressed not feeling successful will the c. prompt be used

- c.) What hindered you from maximizing your success?

Did you feel comfortable enough to be candid with me about how you feel about your success?

Part II Exploring your corporate environment.

How would you describe the corporate cultures that you have experienced?

How did you fit within those cultures or organizations?

(Explore deeper to get an understanding of a sense of belonging for the black woman middle managers in the organization).

(Ask about being candid if it feels like a packaged answer)

Tell me about a lesson that you share with people that you mentor in the workplace based on your experiences.

Can you talk about the event or incident that led to the lesson?

What actually leads to feeling a sense of belonging within the organization, or not feeling the sense of belonging? Do you think that it's important?

Part III Exploring your experience as a black woman.

What has it been like for you to be a Black woman executive in corporate America?

(Prompts to better understand the lived experiences of Black Women Executives could include questions on the following if not already covered

work/ life demands, treatment regarding promotions or job placement

Part IV Exploring the decision to stay or go

What led to your departure of your trajectory in corporate America?

What is driving your decision to continue your career trajectory in corporate America?

Facts that are considered when deciding to stay or leave corporate America (based on Participant responses)

General Wrap Up

Is there anything that you would like to add about your experiences before we conclude your interview?

Thank you for your time and your candid answers. Now that you have gone through the experience, is there anyone else that you would like to see included in this research?

Thanks again for participating in this critical work.

APPENDIX F

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL FOR STUDY TWO EXECUTIVE COACHES

The interview is structured in four parts, Part I starts with exploring your background, in Part II we will discuss the corporate environment to finish getting the context of your experiences, and Part III will ask about your experience as the coach of a black woman executive and then close with Part IV which is about gaining an understanding of the dynamics around the black woman executive's decision to stay in or go.

Part I, Exploring your background

Let's start with telling me a little about yourself and your background.

(please provide a wholistic view of who you are, upbringing, family, academic, professional, etc.)

Before becoming an executive coach, did you work in a Fortune 500 company as an executive? Prompt question if it is not clear.

Part II Exploring the corporate environment in which your clients work

What are the demographics of the population that you support?

Did you feel comfortable enough to be candid with me with your responses so far?

Are you primarily contracted by the organization or the executive?

When contracted by the organization, is it hard to get the executives to be authentic about their experiences?

How would you describe the corporate cultures that your clients have experienced?

(Prompts)

Do the organizations that your executives work for have formal mentoring programs for middle managers and/or executives?

Do the organizations tend to support employee resource groups for middle managers/ executives or other affinity groups at the senior management level?

What are some of the strategies that you use to determine how the executive is interacting with and perceived by the organization?

Part III Exploring your experience as the coach of a black woman executive

How well did the black women executives that you have coached fit into the environment and seem to experience a sense of belonging?

Were any of the executives the only black woman at that level in the organization?

If so, did it appear to impact her performance as a senior leader?

or her sense of belonging or feeling valued by the organization?

Ask about being candid if it feels like a packaged answer

Tell me about a lesson that you have learned working with black women executives

What are some of the unique challenges that you have seen for black women executives?

What are some of the strategies available to overcome those challenges?

Are you familiar with the term microaggressions or exclusionary behaviors? (If not, supply definition - indirect, subtle or unintentional discrimination against members of a marginalized group).

Have any of your black women clients shared that they have experienced microaggressions in the workplace? If so, how has that impacted their sense of belonging? Their being able to feel supported in the org?

What are some of the characteristics or traits of the black woman executive that allows her to be successful in the corporate environment. Traits that you have seen as derailing.

Part IV Exploring the decision to stay or go

Given your experiences and observations, what ultimately impacts the black woman executive's decision to stay or leave corporate America.

If the black woman executive opts to leave early:

Is there anything that you have seen that can be done differently by the organization to impact the decision?

Is there anything that you have seen that can be done differently by the black woman executive throughout her career that would change the trajectory to leave before reaching the C-Suite?

General Wrap Up

Is there anything that you would like to add about your experiences before we conclude your interview?

Thank you for your time and your candid answers. Now that you have gone through the experience, is there anyone else that you would like to see included in this research?

Thanks again for participating in this critical work.