Leaning In and Pushing Through: The Challenges and Strategies of African American Women Executives of Nonprofit Organizations in the New York Metropolitan Area

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Abstract
Within the nonprofit sector, people of color aspire to be leaders more than their White counterparts (Thomas-Breitfeld & Kunreuther, 2017). Black women are 2.8 times more likely than White women to aspire to powerful positions with a prestigious title, but 44% feel stalled and 26% feel their efforts go unrecognized by superiors more than their White female counterparts (Hewlett & Green, 2015). With a limited number of Black women in executive positions within the social sector, little is known about the perceived obstacles and employed strategies to navigate their way to the decision-making positions, specifically social justice organizations. The purpose of this study was to delve into the lived experiences of African American women who have acquired executive positions in the social sector and uncover a blueprint for success in navigating through the leadership labyrinth. The study utilizes social capital theory and Black feminist theory in exploring the narratives of the participants. The study utilized a qualitative, phenomenological approach. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with seven participants from the New York metropolitan area. The findings of obstacles African American women experienced included (a) negative feedback, (b) perception of leadership, (c) fiscal solvency, and compensation. The strategies revealed by African American women were (a) positive feedback, (b) professional development and academic advancement, (c) connection to culture, (d) unsolicited opportunity, (e) mentoring and sponsorship, and (f) trailblazing. The women also shared recommendations of what those who aspire to be leaders should consider while on their journey to acquiring a nonprofit executive position.

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Leaning In and Pushing Through: The Challenges and Strategies of African American Women Executives of Nonprofit Organizations in the New York Metropolitan Area

By

Zeny Alvarez-Cleveland

Submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree
Ed.D. in Executive Leadership

Supervised by
Dr. Janice Kelly

Committee Member
Dr. Bil Leipold

Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. School of Education
St. John Fisher College

December, 2017
Dedication

“I Am Because We Are” – African Proverb

“Be The Change You Wish To See” - Gandhi

The journey to complete the doctoral program would not have been possible without the guidance of God, the love of my family, and the support of so many. To my mother for being my role model; you have always encouraged us to take education one step further. I continuously use you as my measure of a woman. You have given me every opportunity to be myself, have pushed me to be my best and have loved me through and through, which has allowed me to accomplish so much!

To my sisters, thank you for just being there, through all the ups and downs, during my journey and some actually had to do with school. Love you! To all the women in my family who have shown me that leadership, womanhood, femininity, and strength can coexist. Thank you Aunt Bebe, Aunt Mary, Aunt Baby, and Nana. To the men in my life – Uncle Ansley, Oba, James, Jordan, and Hunter for following your dreams and being a living example of stepping out on faith, doing what you love, and blessing others by just being you. Thanks daddy for always loving me the best way you knew how and being proud of every step I took.

To the true love of my life, our journey has always started with me in school! I am forever learning and so happy you appreciate that about me. Thank you for being the man I have prayed for, the dutiful and loving partner in my life, a leading man not afraid to let me shine and to shine right alongside of me. Your continued patience,
perseverance, and love is received and reciprocated. Let’s continue this journey into forever.

I would like to thank St. John Fisher College and its faculty for affording me this opportunity and supporting me through this process. I would like to note my appreciation to Dr. Dingus for being one of my cheerleaders during my matriculation. Special thanks to Dr. Seibert as my advisor, to Dr. Jallow for her continuous guidance, and Dr. Wallis for his helpfulness. I would like to note my immeasurable appreciation to my Dissertation Chair, Dr. Janice Kelly, to my Committee Member, Dr. Bil Leipold, for your steadfastness and support in guiding me through my journey. To my team, The Elements, I absolutely love you! To “Super 7” we did it and we did it together!

To the participants, I am eternally grateful for your selfless contributions. Your lived experiences were the most important instrument in this study. I thank you for sharing your personal stories and experiences with me. It is my hope that this dissertation serves as a beacon of light to other aspiring leaders who have the passion to make their life’s work advancing social justice causes for the betterment of all

Finally, to the strong women in my circle including my sister friends, golden girls, sorority sisters and mentors…… to all of you I dedicate this dissertation.
Biographical Sketch

Ms. Cleveland has worked with families for over 15 years. In 2003, she was a family advocate for youth who were placed out of their homes and worked with an interdisciplinary team to ensure reunification and service delivery. Following this, Zenya served as a school social worker for under-credited and overaged youth where she developed a curriculum for character building through service learning and leadership development which assisted in successful outcomes for the Community Based Organization and the New York City Department of Education site. In 2009, Zenya was welcomed to the Head Start of Rockland, Inc. family where she currently serves as the Family and Community Engagement Director and Staff Training Coordinator for Head Start of Rockland, Inc.

She has served as a lecturer of social work practice at the College of New Rochelle (College of New Resources), Columbia University, Mercy College, New York University, and Nyack College. Ms. Cleveland graduated from Bennett College for Women with a Bachelor of Science degree in Psychology and attended Columbia University School of Social Work to receive a Master of Science degree in Social Work. She came to St. John Fisher in the spring of 2015 and began the Doctorate in Education program in Executive Leadership. Ms. Cleveland pursued her research in African American women executives of nonprofit organizations under the direction of Dr. Janice Kelly and Dr. Bil Leipold and received her degree in 2017.
Abstract

Within the nonprofit sector, people of color aspire to be leaders more than their White counterparts (Thomas-Breitfeld & Kunreuther, 2017). Black women are 2.8 times more likely than White women to aspire to powerful positions with a prestigious title, but 44% feel stalled and 26% feel their efforts go unrecognized by superiors more than their White female counterparts (Hewlett & Green, 2015). With a limited number of Black women in executive positions within the social sector, little is known about the perceived obstacles and employed strategies to navigate their way to the decision-making positions, specifically social justice organizations. The purpose of this study was to delve into the lived experiences of African American women who have acquired executive positions in the social sector and uncover a blueprint for success in navigating through the leadership labyrinth. The study utilizes social capital theory and Black feminist theory in exploring the narratives of the participants.

The study utilized a qualitative, phenomenological approach. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with seven participants from the New York metropolitan area. The findings of obstacles African American women experienced included (a) negative feedback, (b) perception of leadership, (c) fiscal solvency, and compensation. The strategies revealed by African American women were (a) positive feedback, (b) professional development and academic advancement, (c) connection to culture, (d) unsolicited opportunity, (e) mentoring and sponsorship, and (f) trailblazing. The women
also shared recommendations of what those who aspire to be leaders should consider while on their journey to acquiring a nonprofit executive position.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

The 20th century, in many ways, marked the beginning of leadership theories, studies, and assumptions. The examination of leadership traits of influential people and organizational executives was traditionally focused on a homogeneous group – White males. Long accepted theories primarily focused on the dominant culture of White male hierarchal model of control and competitive behavior (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Loden, 1985; Northouse, 2016; Parker & Ogilvie, 1996). However, in the last few decades, there has been an increase in studies conducted on gender and leadership (Lennon, 2013; Morrison, White, & Van Velsor, 1987; Waring, 2003).

Studies have shown that certain sectors, such as education, government and human services agencies benefit with women in leadership positions (Collins, 2005; Eagly & Carli, 2007). Women are more likely to work in the human service sector for many reasons. Some reasons they excel in these industries are due to women being more likely to exhibit long-term nurturing behavior, volunteer, and give to public causes (DiMaggio & Louch, 1997; Eagly & Crowley, 1986; Hewlett & Marshall, 2014; Hodgkinson & Weitzman, 1996). Women tend to behave more generously when faced with economic decisions and are less likely to condone or engage in corrupt behavior (Eckel & Grossman, 1998; Swamy, Knack, Lee, & Azfar, 2001). Men are more likely to lead in an autocratic and directive way because they are less constrained by attitudinal bias and have been socialized early (Eagly, Wood, & Diekman, 2000). However, more research is needed to examine leadership characteristics as it relates to gender, race, and
leadership. Several survey results consistently indicate less than 20% of executives/CEOs of nonprofits are people of color and this has not changed for over a decade (Thomas-Breitfeld & Kunreuther, 2017).

Rarely is intersectionality considered in the concept of leadership development (Byrd, 2009; Collins, 2002; Stanley, 2009). Similarly, researchers claim intersectionality is seldom considered on how a person’s race and gender might influence their concept of leadership, whether in business, academia, or nonprofit sectors (Byrd, 2009; Cain, 2015; Crenshaw, 1989; Davis, 2012; McKinsey-Mabry, 2011; Waring, 2003). Nevertheless, little is known about the career pathways and leadership development of African American women. There is a lack of literature on African American women in leadership development, specifically in the nonprofit sector. It is important to examine the factors that influence the professional development of African American women to ensure representation in leadership positions of all sectors (Cain, 2015; McKinsey-Mabry, 2011). Hewlett and Green (2015) postulate that African American women are 2.8 times more likely than White women to aspire to powerful positions with a prestigious title, but 44% feel stalled and 26% feel their efforts go unrecognized by superiors. Nonprofit agencies have been of importance for marginalized groups, specifically women and African Americans. The nonprofit sector has provided a means for employment through service to others. However, there is the sense of invisibility as it pertains to social and human capital opportunities in the workplace.

The nonprofit sector employs more African Americans than government agencies or for-profit businesses (Halpern, 2006). According to The White House Project (2009), the nonprofit sector comprises approximately 6% of the overall workforce, with 73% of
nonprofit employees being women. Even in a discipline generally dominated by women and claiming to be diverse, African American women are underrepresented in executive positions compared to their counterparts (Cornelius, Moyers, & Bell, 2011; Halpern, 2006; Lennon, 2013). Many researchers have made known the lack of diversity at top positions in many sectors. Sandberg (2013), best known for her book entitled Lean In, has informed millions of women that they need to be more “self-confident” and “give it your best.” This narrative has been reproduced and has a movement attached to it. She has over 235 studies and references cited to explicate the point of assertiveness and applying oneself at the decision-making table. Although relevant for some, this account of her experience is coming from a White woman’s privileged standpoint.

The movement however does not speak to the intersecting effects of racism and sexism, thus leaving a whole population out of the conversation. This mirrors the sentiments of the feminist movement and civil rights movement in the 1960s. African American women’s stories are unique and add another layer to the struggle of equity.

Norton and Linnell (2014) report that despite the lack of racial and ethnic diversity among organization leaders, a mostly homogenous group of White women, respondents in this study reported that the staffs of their organizations are diverse (p.16). GuideStar (2015) reports that even with the number of female CEOs increasing since 2001 for nonprofit organizations of all sizes, only 16% of organizations with a budget of more than $50 million have female CEOs. Cornelius et al. (2011) reported African Americans accounted for 5% of executives who responded to the survey compared to 82% of White executives who responded. White women comprised 71% of respondents, while African American women encompassed a mere 3.5% of respondents (M.
Cornelius, personal communication, September 16, 2015). Disparities in leadership representation across organizational charts in social sectors indicates a need for deeper analysis.

Nonprofits are dealing with a lack of diversity in leadership. A deficiency of appropriate and timely transference in leadership, the absence of diversity in talent pools, limited understanding of the dynamics between board chairs and executive director relationships are just a few of the challenges faced by the nonprofit field (Carman, Leland & Wilson, 2010; Froelich, McKee, & Rathge, 2011; Hiland, 2015; Tierney, 2006).

Although there are several variables to study in nonprofit leadership, the focus of this study was African American women in positions of power at nonprofits and how they successfully navigated to the decision-making table. As previously mentioned, nonprofits are in need of succession planning that include diverse candidates who aspire to be top leaders in organizations with social justice missions. If future leaders are to be sought after to fill the gap in leadership and in diversity, it is imperative to understand the blueprint of how those who have made it, climbed the ranks.

This research study examined the phenomena of African American women in executive positions of nonprofits. The study attempts to inform organizational leaders about perceived obstacles that may exist for Black women in the social sector. African American women in organizations have been “leaning in” for decades, despite Sandberg’s (2013) idea of “giving it your all.” It is unclear just how many African American women are leading in the Northeast, but researchers in academia, business, and other sectors state the need for diversity to be at the forefront of organizations and their leadership (Cornelius et al., 2011; Lennon, 2013; Pease, 2003). As previously
mentioned, Cornelius et al. (2011) indicated a mere 3.5% of African American women are leading nonprofits of those that participated in the research. As African American women pursue career advancement, the questions exist, what are some of the obstacles they face and what are the strategies they use to reach executive levels in the social sector? This was an effort to gather information of the shared experiences of African American women in the field. Thus, knowledge acquired benefits individuals and organizations. Additionally, data gathered can inform professional practice, such as policies and procedures, for organizational leaders.

Understanding the approaches used by African American women can assist organizations with assimilating ways to be more inclusive and increase diversity in leadership. Furthermore, African American women seeking to become nonprofit executives in the future may be provided with a blueprint for success. The researcher has taken a transformative perspective in comprehending how certain African American women are dealing with the phenomena of their leadership roles in nonprofits, specifically in the New York metropolitan area. The approach allowed for a social justice lens to be utilized while examining the narratives shared by each participant.

**Problem Statement**

If nonprofits are to remain sustainable, current leaders must find a way to fill the leadership shortage. There is a rising need for leadership in the nonprofit sector due to the number of leaders retiring in the field (Froelich et al., 2011, Johnson, 2009; Tierney, 2006). Research has found that a substantial amount of baby boomers are approaching retirement age (Froelich et al., 2011; Tierney, 2006). Research also suggested in the Bridgespan 2006 study, (Tierney, 2006) a total of 640,000 new senior managers will be
needed. For 2016 alone, the study predicted the demand for 78,000 senior managers. The loss of leadership involves chief executive positions such as chief executive officers, chief financial officers, and chief operating officers (Carman et al., 2010). There is a need for executive leadership in nonprofits to continue organizational missions and visions. Tierney (2006) stated there is a constrained supply and a booming demand in nonprofit leadership. According to Tierney (2006) “To put this challenge in context, filling the gap would require recruiting more than 50% of every M.B.A. graduating class, at every university across the country, every year for the next decade” (p. 2).

However, there is an untapped resource that can help alleviate the constraints, but organizational leaders must be willing to self-evaluate just what that means. Organizational leaders need to address their own implicit bias and organizational practices in hiring. Lack of color in top leadership roles has been identified as a structural problem for the nonprofit sector (Thomas-Breitfeld & Kunreuther, 2017). There are African American women who are educated, have the background in the field and want the positions of leadership.

As previously mentioned, women have been a driving force of leadership and employment in the nonprofit sector. Theorists have reported women leaders were found to be more effective in education, government, and social service organizations and describe a democratic leadership style that has historically been a feminine characteristic (Collins, 2005; Eagly, Karau, & Makhijani, 1995; Northouse, 2016). Because of the leadership deficit and the fact that executive leadership positions are traditionally limited to White men and women; it is important to consider more diverse human capital options.
The 2016 GuideStar Annual Nonprofit Compensation Report (GuideStar, 2016) indicates social sector organizations are hiring more female CEOs. However, those CEOs still make less than their male counterparts. The report from the nonprofit information website uses data from 96,000, 2014 IRS 990 filings. GuideStar informs readers that male CEOs make 23% more than their female counterparts at nonprofits with budgets of greater than $25 million. Nonprofits with budgets of more than $10 million made the biggest strides in hiring female CEOs from 2004 to 2014. In 2014, women accounted for 31% of the CEOs at organizations with budgets from $10 to $25 million, 28% at organizations with budgets of $25 to $50 million, and 20% at those with budgets greater than $50 million. This is an average increase from 2004 of 5% with the largest increase being in organizations with budgets of $25 to $50 million. The report notes that even in budget categories with the greatest strides, women still fill less than one-third of the CEO offices. In terms of racial equity and inclusion, McCambridge (2015) reporting on the BoardSource index sample of 878 nonprofit CEOs and 246 board chairs found that a full 80% of board members and 90% of board chairs in their sample were White, as were 89% of the executives.

African American women are educated and present, but are not selected. They are waiting to be noticed, mentored, and chosen. To accomplish this, expanded research is necessary. Although many studies have been conducted on women in leadership roles, there is limited research specifically on African American women in the nonprofit industry in the United States. From the “glass ceiling,” to the “labyrinth,” and most recently the “jungle gym,” phrases have been coined for a depiction of how women had to deal with gender issues in leadership. One could argue that African American women
in organizations experience restrictions in their pathway to leadership positions based on their race, social class, and gender. Some have argued these factors may be deemed negative when considering the educational, social positions, and economic status of African American women (Byrd, 2009; Kaba, 2008; Zamani, 2003). Various researchers have classified the aforesaid as the “concrete ceiling.” Even with the factors mentioned, African American women have enrolled in college, attained degrees, and possess managerial and professional positions more than any of their male counterparts; and yet they get paid less (Eagly, 2007; Kaba, 2005; Zamani, 2003). Researchers clearly document the issues of promotion in corporate and academic settings for African American women, but little is known about the nonprofit sector. Some African American women make it to the upper echelon in the social sector, despite the challenges that persist. Hence, there are a number of factors that affect leadership attainment for African American women.

As one continues to delve into the research there appears to be a mirror of dominance that is evident in the nonprofit sector, academia, and the corporate world of work. Collins (2005) posits that in the social sector money is only an input and not a measure of greatness, where as in business, money is an input, output, and performance metric. He also notes that the social sectors performance must be assessed relative to the mission. Instead of an economic engine, social sectors look at a resources engine. These resources include human capital and impact on individuals and communities. Some business practices mirrored by social sectors include aspects of leadership and defining a performance metric. One may question what nonprofit boards perceive as aspects of
leadership and what the expectation is as a performance metric when looking to hire an executive leader.

Researchers have noted the shift of nonprofits to adopt a business model for sustainability (Collins, 2005; Dart, 2004; Froelich, 1999; Weisbrod 1998). A variety of triggers include unpredictability of individual contributions, mandates of private donors, and varied political leadership and policy initiatives that have influenced nonprofits to diversify (Froelich, 1999). More and more, clients and customers have become the primary income providers in the nonprofit sector, and this places the burden on the people who need the resources, but may not have the means to get services that are not subsidized.

The for-profit business model has a history of organizational executives who are White men. There have been concerns raised by researchers about the impact this can have on fairness, justice, and democratic ideals that do not match entrepreneurialism and satisfying individual clients’ self-interest (Box 1999; Box, Marshall, Reed, & Reed, 2001; deLeon & Denhardt, 2000; Denhardt & Denhardt, 2000; King, Stivers, & Box, 1998; Terry, 1998). What will this mean for the people who are served? The Annie E. Casey Foundation (as cited in Dubose, 2014) indicated at least 60% of nonprofits serve people of color. Another example that is modeled from the business sector is the fact that female representation and compensation in CEO positions declines as budget size increases (GuideStar, 2015; Lennon, 2013). This further illustrates the institutionalized sexism that exists in society. Blatant racism and sexism are not necessarily the threats to equity of opportunity. More and more researchers are finding that policies of days past,
do not allow for the equal access to opportunity and are outdated for the need of organizations, the people they serve, and the talent being ignored.

Gibelman (2000) stated little is documented on the nonprofit sector glass ceiling for women. As recent as April 2017, GuideStar and Green 2.0 collaborated and compiled the diversity of 40 top environmental organizations and their leadership; this initiative was the first of its kind and announced in 2014 (Diversegreen.org, 2017). The social sector is recognizing the need to expand the equity conversation to more than just gender, but to race, class, and generations, as well. There is even less literature that emphasizes how race, class, and gender impact leadership development for African American women. In an effort to address this gap in the research, this study took a transformative approach to identify, examine, and understand the obstacles faced by African American women in nonprofits and their strategies used to achieve high-level management positions. To get a full understanding of the African American women and their experiences as leaders; researchers must understand the multiple forms of oppression they encounter (Crenshaw, 1989; Waring, 2003).

**Theoretical Rationale**

The intersection of race and gender places African American women in a unique category and positions them to experience the effects associated with being African American and women (Collins, 2002; Crenshaw, 1989). Accordingly, there is a need to strengthen the understanding of what African American women in senior-level executive positions experience at nonprofit organizations. There are African American women who have reached the decision-making table in nonprofits. What aided them in their leadership development? What makes a great leader at nonprofits and how did they
navigate their way to the position? Several theories speak to organizations, their structure of leadership, the connection to career advancement relationship, and African American women. The major theories utilized in this study were social capital theory and Black feminist theory. Human capital theory is also discussed as it pertains to organizational culture. Intersectionality is reviewed in order to introduce the reader to the multidimensional aspects of one person. Appendix A explicates the major themes and their connection to one another in the career pathways of African American women.

Social capital resources represent the quality of relationships with subordinates, peers, and superiors which enhances the likelihood of beneficial returns, such as career advancement, promotions, higher earnings, bonuses, as well as better mental health and psychological support (Coleman, 1986; James, 2000; Lin, 2000). Thus, the examination of African American women as they construct strategies to success must consider their viewpoint. Social capital theory speaks to employment experiences and career pathways that were explored in this study. The review of the literature suggests that African American women rely on relationships (i.e., mentoring and sponsorship) to help succeed in business and academia, but little is known about the nonprofit sector (Davis, 2012; Jones & Osbourne-Lampkin, 2013).

Utilizing the Black feminist perspective can translate into lessons that can be used universally. Collins (1993) asserted that “African-American women and other individuals in subordinate groups become empowered when we understand and use those dimensions of our individual, group, and disciplinary ways of knowing that foster our humanity as fully human subjects” (p. 559). Based on standpoint theory and the intercultural perspective, individuals may have varying viewpoints. As a scholar, it is
important to note criticisms and bias faced when delving into what can be an emotionally charged topic. Naming the experience, giving voice, and documentation of such is paramount. This study has added to the limited body of knowledge that exists, but it is the objective to make known, substantiate, and authenticate the achievements and resilience of African American women who will influence others for generations to come.

**Statement of Purpose**

The purpose of this study was to develop an understanding of the strategies used to obtain executive level management positions at nonprofit agencies by African American women. While women and leadership have been studied in corporate and educational settings, there has been a gap identified in the literature on African American women who lead nonprofit organizations (Cain, 2015; Davis & Maldonado, 2015; Eagly et al., 1995). African American women have historically been ignored and most currently understudied. Yet, African American women have always been a strong component of the labor force. There is a wealth of knowledge, experience and a capacity to lead; but the opportunities to elevate are limited as African American women move up the leadership ladder. Sandberg (2013) describes the many different paths to the top as a jungle gym. Her statement, while it explains the broad environment of leadership attainment for women, may be insensitive. Understanding the personal and professional strategies used by African American women in senior level management positions is critical as social sector leaders address the need for executives and the servicing of a changing demographic in the United States. Having a thriving human service sector,
which can transform lives and address social justices’ issues has the potential to change the world for the better.

Statistics have shown that African American women are qualified to fill the gap anticipated for executive positions. Hewlett, Luce, and West (2005) suggest that of highly educated African American female professionals, 25% are active leaders in their religious communities (compared with 16% of White men), and 41% are involved in social outreach activities (compared with 32% of White men). The authors have noted that the activities are transferrable to professional skills and contributions, despite being under the radar of their executive supervisors (Hewlett et al., 2005). Thus, African American women are prepared to manage the administrative gap for the survival of human and social service organizations. Although there may be potential leadership within the organization, it is important for organizations to make the positions accessible if the organization is going to survive and continue the work of their mission. There are strategies organizational leaders can take to ensure accessibility and support of female leadership. The intersection of race and gender bias may be standing in the way of very capable women reaching their fullest potential. Human capital can exponentially guide an organization in the best trajectory possible.

Ibarra, Ely, and Kolb (2013) share three actions to support females’ access to leadership: (a) education of men and women on second generation bias, (b) creating safe “identity workspaces” to support transitions to bigger roles, and (c) anchor women’s development efforts in a sense of leadership purpose and not how women are perceived. The purpose of the study assisted in expanding the idea of safe identity workspaces by allowing women to get better insight into themselves, their organizations, and the
pathway they had to construct to their seat at the decision-making table. The phenomena studied is African American women in executive leadership positions of the social sector because there is a disparity when moving up the organizational chart. However, there are some African American women who have reached the C-Suite level and can offer a perspective to others on how to fill the leadership gap mentioned by scholars.

There is a rising need for leadership in the nonprofit sector due to the number of leaders retiring in the field (Johnson, 2009; Tierney, 2006). However, there is an untapped resource that needs exploration if the problem is to be alleviated. The qualitative phenomenological study of African American women in the New York metropolitan area nonprofit sector has allowed for the examination of the talent pool available, but underutilized.

**Research Questions**

The purpose of this study is to explore the intersectionality of race and gender for African American women as it pertains to their leadership development in nonprofits. African American women have different experiences of leadership development compared to other women (Bell & Nkomo, 2003; Collins, 2002; Davis & Maldonado, 2015; O’Neill, 1994). African American women’s lived experiences were explored through qualitative inquiry. The review of literature regarding African American women, Black feminist theory, and nonprofit leadership have led to the following research questions:

1. What challenges, if any, do African American women face in obtaining senior level management positions of nonprofit agencies?
2. What strategies facilitated the attainment of executive positions among African American women in social sector organizations?

Potential Significance of the Study

Research in the last decade indicates that, while African American women have been graduating from college at a higher rate than their counterparts and have always been a strength in the labor force, there is an underrepresentation in executive positions in nonprofit human service organizations (Kaba, 2005; Lennon, 2013; Norton & Linnell, 2014; Zamani, 2003). As previously stated, approximately 640,000 new senior leaders and executive chief officers are needed (Froelich et al., 2011; Tierney, 2006). As the United States faces an increasingly diverse population, organizational leaders will need to find ways to access the opportunity for diverse leadership growth (Lennon, 2013; Norton & Linnell, 2014). Although research continues to support the need to diversify, there is a failure to act by organizations. Sandberg (2013) offers ways that individuals can lean in. What does one do, when leaning in is not enough? Feminist cultural critic, hooks (2013) offers an assessment of *Lean In* as follows:

The call for gender equality in corporate America is undermined by the practice of exclusivity, and usurped by the heteronormative White supremacist bonding of marriage between White women and men. Founded on the principles of White supremacy and structured to maintain it, the rites of passage in the corporate world mirror this aspect of our nation. Let it be stated again and again that race, and more importantly White supremacy, is a taboo subject in the world according to Sandberg. (hooks, 2013)
The focus in *Lean In* feminism is such a narrow conceptualization of who is a “woman.” Evidence suggests by including a diverse group of people at the decision-making table in organizations significantly helps meet goals (Kreitz, 2008; Pease, 2003; Winston, 2001). For example, Winston (2001) reports that “institutions that are rated most highly effective in terms of diversity are also highly rated in relation to other measures of organizational success” (p. 524). Similarly, Pease (2003) supported the importance of race and ethnicity in nonprofit organizations and noted that although being inclusive may be “the right thing to do,” it has become a necessity for organizational success. Lennon (2013) did an extensive research study on the leadership of women in 14 sectors. The 14 sectors include academia, arts and entertainment, business and commercial banking, entrepreneurship, journalism and media, K-12 education, law, medicine, military, the nonprofit and philanthropic sector, politics and government, religion, sports, as well as technology. Notably, recommendations for future action included the increase of diverse executive staff, particularly with women of color, and examining promotion and compensation processes and practices. Similarly, Thomas-Breitfeld and Kunreuther (2017) posit that the low percentage of nonprofit leaders of color in top organizational roles is a problem for the nonprofit sector. Based on the results of their study, the nonprofit sector can seize the opportunity to align the values of equity with the practices throughout the sector.

The significance of this study builds on the call to action for nonprofits to have sustainable leadership options and create the pathways needed for human capital to flourish for all invested in the mission being set forth. Although there are opportunities for growth, it does not appear to happen for African American women. Many studies
have discussed the deficit in leadership at nonprofits and the need to fill the gaps to ensure successful transition of leadership. Despite the research on best practices to fill the shortage and the importance of diversity at the decision-making table; there has been a failure to act. The underrepresentation of women and people of color is evident and needs to be addressed to tackle the social ills of this country in a sustainable manner. Diversity in gender and race allows for a better collection of leaders needed for the future of effective nonprofits.

**Definitions of Terms**

_African American/Black_ – According to the Office of Management and Budget, “Black or African American” refers to a person having origins in any of the Black racial groups of Africa. The Black racial category includes people who marked the “Black, African Am., or Negro” checkbox. It also includes respondents who reported entries such as African American; Sub-Saharan African entries, such as Kenyan and Nigerian; and Afro-Caribbean entries, such as Haitian and Jamaican (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010).

_Black feminist theory/Black feminist thought_ – An activist’s response to the Black women’s subordination within intersecting oppressions of race, class, gender, and sexuality (Collins, 2002).

_C-Suite_ – The top senior executives whose titles start with the letter C, such as chief executive officer, chief financial officer, and chief information officer (Cook & Glass, 2014). See also senior level management and executive. For the purpose of this study this will be used interchangeably.

_Concrete ceiling/restrictions_ - This term reflects the barriers that women of color face more accurately. You can see through it to the level above – and you know that there
is something to aspire to. If you can see it, you can achieve it. Concrete, on the other hand, is practically impossible to break through by yourself. It is definitely impossible to see through. There is no visible destination, just what seems like a dead end. This is what women of color face in the workforce: an often impenetrable barrier, with no vision of how to get to the next level (Babers, 2016)

*Democratic leadership style/legislative leadership style* – This term is defined as members of a group taking more of a participatory role in the decision-making process. This style of leadership encourages opportunity, discussion, and different ideas (Collins, 2005; Northouse, 2016). For this study these will be used interchangeably.

*Executive* – A person who holds senior managerial authority in a business or organization and is the leader of the business or organization (Cook & Glass, 2014). See also senior level management and C-Suite. For the purposes of this study these definitions will be used interchangeably.

*Glass ceiling* - The term glass ceiling was popularized in a 1986 Wall Street Journal article describing the invisible barriers that women confront as they approach the top of the corporate hierarchy (Federal Glass Ceiling Commission, 1995).

*Identity workspaces* - This is a safe space for learning, experimentation, and community which is critical for leadership development for women. As women move up the organization, visibility and scrutiny make them risk averse and overly focused on details and not on purpose. This makes women less apt to try out unfamiliar behaviors and roles because they feel threatened (Ibarra et al., 2013).

*Jungle gym* – A metaphor coined in which successful leaders have their vision in the peripheral, so they can see when opportunities come along and swing that way. It can
be a lateral move and allows for a broader experience base. This can change quickly. (Sellers, 2009).

*Labyrinth* – A better metaphor for what confronts women in their professional endeavors is the labyrinth. Passage through a labyrinth is not simple or direct, but requires persistence, awareness of one’s progress, and a careful analysis of the puzzles that lie ahead. It is this meaning that we intend to convey. For women who aspire to top leadership, routes exist but are full of twists and turns, both unexpected and expected. Because all labyrinths have a viable route to the center, it is understood that goals are attainable. The metaphor acknowledges obstacles but is not ultimately discouraging (Eagly & Carli, 2007).

*Human services/nonprofit/social sector* – The sector is defined as programs supported by a government or private organization that help people address needs that are not met through government or private sources (English, 2015). These include programs that protect and enhance the personal well-being of individuals or families in need of assistance (Gibelman, 2000). Human services, nonprofit and social sector are used interchangeably for the purpose of this study.

*Second generation bias* – A bias that is embedded in stereotypes and organizational practices that can be hard to detect, but when people are made aware of it, they see possibilities for change (Ibarra et al., 2013).

*Senior level management* – An individual at the highest level of organizational management who has the day-to-day responsibilities of managing a company or corporation. (Menz, 2012). This includes chief executive officers, chief operating
officers, and chief financial officers. See also executive. For the purpose of this study these will be used interchangeably.

*Social capital theory* – Social capital resources represent the quality of relationships with peers, subordinates and superiors which enhances the likelihood of beneficial returns, such as career advancement and promotions, higher earnings or bonuses, along with better mental health and psychological support (Coleman, 1986; James, 2000; Lin, 2000).

*Underrepresentation* – This term is used to describe the lack of people representative of the population that exists in a particular location. For this study, the United States is used as the location and the statistics for its overall population.

**Chapter Summary**

African American women continue to make strides in navigating the labyrinth of leadership attainment in a variety of sectors in the United States, yet there is still an underrepresentation that exists. This research specifically examined the nonprofit sector. Inclusive, reflective and sustainable leadership may be found in the pool of talent that has historically been untapped. African American women who have obtained senior level leadership positions may offer strategies to future leaders and organizations. These women will be able to give others insight on a formula for success and a blueprint to leadership.

In Chapter 2 a review of the literature is provided with a focus on research pertinent to the examination of the topic. This section includes information on the leadership shortage in nonprofits, leadership characteristics that benefit nonprofits, the advantages of diverse leadership, women in leadership, a summary of the educational
attainment of African American women, challenges faced by African American women in the workforce, and career pathways of African American women. There is also a summation on social capital, intersectionality, and Black feminist theories. Chapter 3 provides details of the research methodology. Chapter 4 presents findings of the research study and Chapter 5 discusses implications of the research along with recommendations for the future.
Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

Introduction and Purpose

The United States Census Bureau (2010) reports that women make up 50.8% of the U.S. population. Ideally, this statistic would be representative of the number of women in leadership across different disciplines. Some organizations that are diverse and inclusive tend to be more likely to meet organizational goals and function better (Homan & Greer, 2013; Pease, 2003; Winston, 2001). Sadly, this is not the case for most organizations; while progress is being made, there is a need for efforts to move the women’s equity agenda forward. Despite the U.S. population being more than 50% women and making up 47% of the labor force, women remain, on average, less than 20% of top management and executive leaders across 14 sectors in the United States (Lennon, 2013; Sampson & Moore, 2008). As previously stated, the 14 sectors include academia, arts and entertainment, business and commercial banking, entrepreneurship, journalism and media, K-12 education, law, medicine, military, the nonprofit and philanthropic sector, politics and government, religion, sports, as well as technology.

Although, African Americans comprise 12.2% of the population in the United States, there is a lack of representation in leadership positions across disciplines, specifically in nonprofit leadership (Lennon, 2013; Norton & Linnell, 2014). GuideStar (2015) stated even with the increasing number of female CEOs since 2001 for nonprofit organizations of all sizes, only 16% of organizations with a considerable budget of more than $50 million have appointed female executives. Cornelius et al. (2011) indicated
African American participants accounted for 5% of executives compared to 82% of White respondents. White women comprised of 71% of respondents, while African American women encompassed a mere 3.5%. Lack of color in top leadership roles has been identified as a structural problem for the nonprofit sector (Thomas-Breitfeld & Kunreuther, 2017).

The obstacles and strategies of African American women who obtain senior level positions in the social sector encompass a critical gap in the career development and leadership literature. African American women continue to be underrepresented in leadership positions despite their many advancements in American society. For example, Davis and Maldonado (2015) studied African American women in academia in which the participants voiced that the intersection of race and gender affected their advancement in leadership positions; in many cases women’s leadership is not only compared to men’s but women are unjustifiably placed in lower level leadership positions. African American women make 68 cents on the dollar and are less likely to attain managerial positions than White men, White women and African American men (Eagly & Carli, 2007; National Coalition on Black Civic Participation, 2014). Similarly, some researchers acknowledged the lack of research on the African American women and their insights (Cain, 2015; Davis, 2012; McKinsey-Mabry, 2011).

Institutionalized racism and sexism have long been a social justice problem in the United States for all sectors. Business, academia, and human services have a narrative that speaks to the injustices to its African American citizens. Sexism has been a fight that White women have championed, but for African American women it has only been a piece of a much bigger puzzle which includes racism.
As nonprofit organizations face challenges in meeting the needs of a diverse client population and a predicted wave of retirements, organizational leadership will need to find a way to address the opportunity for the leadership growth of African American women (Norton & Linnell, 2014; Tierney, 2006). This research study focused on African American women who are already in senior level management positions in the social sector. The purpose of this study was to explore the journey of these women as they navigated the career ladder not accessible to many. For this reason, it is important to understand the literature available about the topic.

The objective of this literature review is to give its reader an overview on the topic of challenges and obstacles for African American women in nonprofit leadership. Research in the last decade has indicated nonprofits are in need executive leaders (Linscott, 2011; Tierney, 2006). Despite the small pool of African American women in executive leadership positions, a closer examination is needed to explore how they strategically navigated the nonprofit sector to an executive role. Researchers have recommended diversity management, formal and informal career paths for women in leadership education, and development that include race and ethnicity and a need to acknowledge and communicate the different interactions of Black women to provide adequate human resource management (Combs, 2003; Mastracci & Herring, 2010; Sampson & Moore, 2008)

To address what factors influence the career pathways of African American women who work in nonprofits, a review of previous literature is presented. There is very little literature that specializes in African American women leadership of nonprofits. Sections of this literature review will include the following: (a) the leadership shortage,
(b) lack of women in leadership, (c) social capital theory, (d) intersectionality, (e) Black feminist thought, (f) leadership in the social sector, (g) benefits of diversity in leadership, (h) educational attainment of Black women, (i) challenges faced by Black women, and (j) career pathways developed by Black women.

A Call To Action

**Leadership deficit in nonprofits.** Nonprofits have long been a part of the American and global landscape, meeting the needs of citizens in a variety of ways. Nonprofits are one of the fastest growing types of organizations in the world and nearly 90% of them have been in existence since 1950 (Hall, 2005). The steady increase of the social sector continues with reported numbers from 2002-2012 of the growth going from 1.1 million to 1.44 million registered organizations and commensurate the need for more management (Hall, 2005; Linscott 2011; McKeever, & Pettijohn, 2014; Tierney, 2006).

Research has predicted that a substantial amount of baby boomers are approaching retirement age (Froelich et al., 2011; Tierney, 2006). Tierney (2006) purported that in the last decade, a total of 640,000 new senior managers would be needed, including 78,000 senior managers in 2016 alone. The loss of leadership involves chief executive positions, namely chief executive officers, chief financial officers and chief operating officers (Carman et al., 2010). Baby boomers are leaving vacant executive positions in nonprofits. The literature continues to grow about the predicted leadership deficit and succession planning of nonprofits. The research has been clear and continues to grow about the gap in leadership that is looming due to the retirements of baby boomers, but there is a scarcity of literature on how to fill the pipeline of executive leaders exiting the field.
At the same time, Johnson (2009) examined the issue and suggests that if analyzed through the supply and demand model the deficit commentaries are flawed. She noted that the labor market and nonprofit organizations suggest trends that will alleviate a leadership deficit much like schools, job markets, and housing markets have accommodated the movement of the generation. Linscott (2011) stated “there has been increased movement of existing nonprofit leaders into different roles whether within or outside the sector along with barriers to young emerging nonprofit professionals from establishing nonprofit careers” (p. 33). However, the Bridgespan study (Tierney, 2006) was revisited by the organization in 2015 (Milway, Kramer, & Landles-Cobb, 2015) and stated that organizations found that supply grew with the demand, but the demand is still high and is due to organizational growth, executives leaving for other organizations, or being asked to leave by their boards.

Research suggests that regardless of the reason for the deficit, it is still in existence (Froelich et al., 2011; Milway et al., 2015). Strategies on how to fill the gap have been cultivated. Investing in leadership capacity, evaluating management compensation, board participation in succession planning, and exploring new talent pools have all been identified (Tierney, 2006; Johnson, 2009). Hall (2008) shared that CEOs spend 10% of their time developing leaders, while those in top companies are spending more than 25% of their time developing leaders. He also noted that within a 3-year period there was a 22% increase of returns for shareholders. This research helps show the importance of leadership development in organizations, by creating an understanding of how Black women strategically navigate for success in nonprofit leadership attainment.
It is compelling that included in the 2012 Benchmarking Women’s Leadership Report “exploring new talent pools” recommendation was a charge to expand recruitment networks to foster career mobility for the talent already on the job was needed. It was further explained that “up to now, nonprofits have tended to draw their leaders from a relatively small circle of friends and acquaintances” (Lennon, 2013, p. 32). Third Sector New England 2014 study reports that “despite the lack of racial and ethnic diversity among organization leaders, respondents to the same 2014 New England Survey reported that the staffs of their organizations are fairly diverse” (Norton & Linnell, 2014, p. 16). This researcher infers that the recommendations made above would have a direct impact on the diversity of staff being developed and moving into positions of power. Several survey results consistently indicate less than 20% of executives/CEOs of nonprofits are people of color and this has not changed for over a decade (Thomas-Breitfeld & Kunreuther, 2017).

In the Daring to Lead Study, of all respondents, 3.5% of the leaders were African American women (Cornelius, M. personal communication, September 16, 2015). Many nonprofits with budgets of $1 million or less have women as CEOs; as the budget increases the representation declines and women of color have not reached the level of equality that White women have in the social sector (Cornelius et al., 2011; GuideStar, 2015; Hallock, 2000; Preston, 1994). A recent Third Sector New England 2014 study reports that in the New England region nonprofit leaders are “mostly homogenous group of White women, while demographics of the areas they serve are changing to people of color and as the demographic changes agencies will need to develop the capacity to cultivate and hire diverse staff” (p. 18). Research continues to inform the field of the
inequity in gender and race within leadership. It is important to also note that the pool of
talent should be expanded to fill the gaps and that there are benefits that come with
having a diverse set of leaders at the table to inform decisions. The following section will
speak to the lack of women in executive leadership positions. Although nonprofit
sectors have provided women and minorities with a wider range of workplace
advancement, the nonprofit sector employs less women and minorities in executive or
senior level positions (Gibelman, 2000; Joslyn, 2003). Diversity in leadership aids in the
bottom line and is an advantage to social justice initiatives.

Lack of women in leadership. There have been several ideas shared about
women in leadership and obstacles they faced. The U.S. Glass Ceiling Commission
(1995) stated “The term glass ceiling was popularized in a 1986 Wall Street Journal
article describing the invisible barriers that women confront as they approach the top of
the corporate hierarchy” (p. 3). As research on women and leadership evolved, new
theories were introduced (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Northouse, 2016). Per Eagly and Carli
(2007), “When you put all the pieces together, a new picture emerges for why women
don’t make it into the C-Suite. It’s not the glass ceiling, but the sum of many obstacles
along the way” (p. 1). Women continue to dominate the non-executive staffing of the
nonprofit sector with no significant changes in the last 5 years (Nonprofit HR Solutions
2010). BlackEntrepreneurProfile.com reports as of January 2015, of all the Fortune 500
companies, only 15 African Americans have ever made it to chairman or CEO and of
these, five are active and only one is a woman (BlackEntrepreneurProfile.com, 2015).

Barsh and Yee (2011) posited, of all the forces that hold women back none are as
powerful as entrenched beliefs; they found that many women hold limiting beliefs that
stand in their own way – such as waiting to fill in more skills or just waiting to be asked.

Sandberg (2013) stated that internal obstacles are rarely discussed and underplayed.

Sandberg argued “getting rid of these internal barriers is critical to gaining power” (p. 8).

Imposter phenomena/syndrome has been defined as a mindset that is a powerful factor in the choice of women to move forward and upward. Clance and Imes (1978) have defined the term imposter phenomenon to be used to designate an internal experience of intellectual phonies, which appears to be particularly prevalent and intense among a select sample of high achieving women. Roché (2014) wrote the “imposter syndrome is blind, in the sense that it can strike anyone, even White male CEOs. Nevertheless, it’s particularly prevalent among women, minorities, and from less privileged socioeconomic backgrounds” (pp. 14-15). Northouse (2016) comments “women are less likely to self-promote than men are, and are less likely to initiate negotiation; an important tool all leaders need” (p. 403).

Strategies in leadership and promotion differ when gender is considered, and women use different pathways to advance their careers (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Northouse, 2016). The evidence states these differences attribute to the lack of women in positions of power (Barsh & Yee, 2011; Sandberg, 2013). Although this issue is multifaceted, self-selection has been identified as a strong factor. As a researcher, the evolution and complexity of understanding obstacles is very important as it pertains to gender because of the number of women in the labor force is not representative in decision making positions. The obstacles are then compounded by race and should not be ignored when addressing the concern of equity in leadership. A survey of 644 women who work full-time for nonprofit organizations was commissioned by The Chronicle and New York
University’s George H. Heyman Jr. Center for Philanthropy and Fundraising to gain insight as those who aspire to lead, but don’t (DiMento, 2014). The survey revealed that 55% of the respondents said it was the time commitment, and 44% said it was stress involved in leading a nonprofit. This trend has been reframed as opting out, but others state that it is the company’s lack of family balance policies that force women to make the choice. As we look at the disparities in leadership, in terms of race, there has been no real assessment on whether Black women even have this option in the first place.

The next section discusses the theoretical framework which explicates the importance of studying the intersectionality of race, gender and class in the landscape of the research context.

Theoretical Framework

Social capital theory. Social capital resources represent the quality of relationships with peers, subordinates, and superiors which enhance the likelihood of beneficial returns, such as career advancement and promotions, higher earnings or bonuses, along with better mental health and psychological support (Coleman, 1990; James, 2000; Lin, 2000). This theory gives the researcher a framework to understand the importance of relationships in attaining positions of power. In an examination of the literature of career pathways for women in general, the importance of networking and mentoring was a theme in academia and business. There was little information on the social sector in career advancement. There is an absence of professional network and support systems for women who aspire to advanced leadership positions in educational systems (Angel, Killacky, & Johnson, 2013).
**Intersectionality.** This theory considers that there are multiple identities and experiences that need to be acknowledged when addressing any issue. Race, gender, and class all play a role in the standpoint of an individual’s perspective and worldview. The concept of intersectionality is critical to point out because of the different types of oppression dealt with by marginalized groups. Dealing with gender as a biological difference, race as a product of social thought and relations, and socioeconomic inequity; intersectionality must be a component in any study of Black women, even though it brings a sense of complexity for the researcher. Cole (2009) concluded that Black feminism and the concept of intersectionality is a “paradigm for theory and research offering new ways of understanding the complex causality that characterizes social phenomena” (p. 179). It is further explained that intersectionality makes plain that gender, race, class, and sexuality simultaneously affect the perceptions, experiences and opportunities of everyone living in a society stratified along these dimensions (Cole, 2009, p. 179). Crenshaw (1989) stated that because the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism, any analysis that does not take intersectionality into account cannot sufficiently address the way Black women are subordinated.

**Black feminist thought.** The Black feminist movement grew out of, and in response to, the needs of Black women who felt they were being racially oppressed in the women's movement and sexually oppressed in the Black liberation movement. The U.S. House of Representatives (2007) Office of House and Archives recounts the beginnings of feminism, when women sought the right to vote after the Civil War in 1869. The National Women’s Suffrage Association (NWSA) was established to accomplish the
goal. However, because of its racial divisiveness some women organized the American Woman’s Suffrage Association. Both organizations later experienced a sense of indifference and apathy amongst its members, which led to a stall in their campaigns. In the 1880s and 1890s a noticeable trend in volunteerism amongst middle class women was capitalized on by the suffragist organizations. It is noted that the two national organizations merged. One can infer, when considering American history that “middle-class” in the 1880s and 1890s included very few Black Americans. Economics is noted and introduced in the feminist movement of the 19th century. However, a New York doctor, John Van Evrie, wrote that even freedom and education could not transform the Negro any more than “it would be to change a cow into a horse, or to raise the dead” (Peterson, 2012, para. 5).

On March 3, 1913, the Women’s Suffrage March was organized. This also happened to be the first public act of social justice for Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc (Giddings, 1988). This group of college educated Black women, who wanted to be a part of the movement, were told to march in the back of the protest (Bernard, 2013; Giddings, 1988). This is just one example of how the dissonance within feminism manifested itself. This push to accomplish a goal without the consideration of the whole added to the normalizing of social justice movements, actively marginalizing people in their fight for equity. How can one account for race, gender, and class in narratives of a marginalized people? Collins (2002) discussed this in her explanation of Black feminist thought.

Collins (2002) noted that Black feminist thought is an activist’s response to the Black woman’s subordination within intersecting oppressions of race, class, gender, and sexuality. hooks (2013) explained during a lecture at The New School, her early works
were meant to bring voice to Black women. The narrative of Black women is unique because it considers race, gender, and at times, class and sexuality as mutually inclusive during any analysis to address problems in any discipline.

In the 1970s a by-product of the Black feminist movement was the establishing of the National Black Feminist Organization (NBFO). The NBFO Collection Inventory located at the University of Illinois at Chicago reports the organization’s founding below:

NBFO emerged from meetings held among African-American women at the New York offices of NOW (National Organization of Women) in May and August 1973. The NBFO pledged itself to address problems of discrimination faced by African-American women due to their race and gender. The NBFO 1973 Statement of Purpose: "We, not White men or Black men, must define our self-image as Black women and not fall into the mistake of being placed on the pedestal which is even being rejected by White women." The NBFO sought to change the portrayal of African-American women in the mass media, raised consciousness about sexual abuse in the African-American community, and fought for higher wages and greater political influence for African-American women. (University of Illinois, Chicago, 2017, para. 1)

Throughout the years the feminist movement has not been universally accepted. The evolution of feminism was evident in the 1990s. Power feminism was introduced and was coined by Wolf in 1993 (Hains, 2009). This was a positive form of feminist thought and engagement that begins with the assumption that women have “enormous power;” both financially and politically. She stated that women can work within the system to effect change.
Iannello (2010) has made note that even within the feminist movement a
dissention must be acknowledged and discussed. There has been a distinct tension
between third wave, second wave and conservative feminism and leadership ideas.
Iannello (2010) communicates the difference between a collective consciousness and a
more individual and fluid idea of feminism that has been introduced in the third wave.
As time progressed and certain goals in the women’s movement were being achieved,
there was a suspicion that the younger generation was apathetic to the struggle.

Third wave feminism was described by author Walker (2009), as a response to a
feeling on college campuses that feminism in the 1990s was no longer relevant. She
stated that third wave is an attempt to building a bridge in accepting differences and to
look seven generations ahead in terms of the feminist movement (Lavin Agency
Speaker’s Bureau, 2009). Taylor (1998) noted an example of third wave feminism
displayed on October 25, 1997. The Million Woman March took place and over 500,000
women gathered to counteract that thought of apathy, to which it had been eluded. This
wave spoke to women of a multicultural, cross generational and more inclusive
background than in the past.

Harding and Norberg (2005) posited that feminist practices and principles are
sensitive towards other underrepresented groups. Black feminist theory is relatively new
compared to other theoretical frameworks in academia. Although there is rich history in
Black feminist thought, it has only recently been named and defined. A comprehensive
list of key thinkers includes hooks, Wells, Cleage and many others that continue to
theorize, conceptualize and explore the historical and lived experience of Black women
(Lindsey, 2014). The concept of intersectionality is critical to point out because of the
different types of oppression dealt with by Black women. Dealing with gender as a biological difference, race as a product of social thought and relations, and socioeconomic inequity; intersectionality must be a component in any study of Black women, even though it brings a sense of complexity for the researcher.

Cole (2009) concluded that Black feminism and the concept of intersectionality is a “paradigm for theory and research offering new ways of understanding the complex causality that characterizes social phenomena” (p. 179). It is further explained that intersectionality makes plain that gender, race, class, and sexuality simultaneously affect the perceptions, experiences, and opportunities of everyone living in a society stratified along these dimensions (Cole, 2009). The Black feminist theory would advocate for the Black female voice being included. The phenomena of the lack of the African American women in leadership supports the need for research in the field to inform practice.

Per Collins (2002), Black feminist thought encompasses three major key components. First is intersectionality which involves the interlocking types of oppression (race, gender, sexuality, and class) and the acknowledging that all areas affect one’s life simultaneously. The second is comprised of embracing Afrocentrism and allowing one’s culture and experience to inform one’s practice. This sense of culture was dangerous to express during the institution of slavery. Finally, Collins includes self-actualization, which is realization of personal potential and seeking personal growth and peak experiences, which is similar to Maslow’s (1943) final stage in the hierarchy of needs.

There is still work that needs to be done. Black feminists have been and are still demanding that the existence of racism must be acknowledged as a structural feature of our relationships with White women (Carby, 1996, p. 63). This transformative worldview
allows for the confrontation of the social justice concerns of Black women that have been historically misrepresented, under acknowledged, or completely ignored.

Black feminist thought continues to evolve in a way that remains relevant. This framework has established itself by giving voice to a history and experience that has not been embraced by the mainstream culture of the United States. During a lecture at Grand Valley State University, Collins (2014) expressed that Black women have been drum majors in social justice, then had their names erased from history only to have someone else take the credit. Collins also shared that lessons from Black feminism include having a critical knowledge of intersectionality, understanding social justice is bigger than yourself, and accepting the dignity of the struggle; knowing it may not happen in your lifetime.

Utilizing the Black feminist theoretical framework can translate into lessons that can be used universally. As a scholar, it is important to note criticisms and bias faced when delving into what can be an emotionally charged topic because of my personal standpoint and worldview. Naming the experience, giving voice and documentation of such is paramount. This study will not only add to the limited body of knowledge that exists, but it is the researcher’s intent to make known, substantiate, and authenticate the achievements and resilience of African American women who will influence others for generations to come.

**Inclusivity as Part of the Solution for Leadership**

**Leadership characteristics that are beneficial to the social sector.** Collins (2005) discussed how good-to-great principles apply to social sectors and that a combination of executive and legislative power will be the best leaders for the future. He
defines executive leadership as having concentrated power to make the right decisions, while legislative leadership is about being able to create the appropriate conditions to allow the right decisions to happen, by using political currency and shared interests. Some leadership traits connected to women appear to be person and task oriented, nurturing and noncompetitive (Martin, Harrison, & Dinitto, 1983). African American women leadership competencies have been described as participative, democratic, transformational, nurturing, independent, and self-confident (Parker & Ogilvie, 1996). The characteristics described above allow for encouragement of voice, agency, and action oriented leadership. Northouse (2016) explains:

Gender is integral to contemporary notions of effective leadership styles that have morphed from a traditional masculine, autocratic style to the more feminine or androgynous styles of democratic and transformational leadership. This will enhance leadership effectiveness by giving the opportunity for people to engage in best leadership practices and not restricting people to those behaviors that are most appropriate to their gender. (p. 409)

Theorists have reported women leaders were found to be more effective in education, government, and social service organizations and describe a legislative/democratic leadership style that has historically been a feminine characteristic (Collins, 2005; Eagly et al., 1995; Northouse, 2016). This style of leadership is essential for the sustainability of nonprofit organizations. Ensuring that leadership is representative of the community at large will serve to benefit the agency and the people it serves. Studies continue to show the positive effects of a diverse group as part of the decision making and strategic planning process.
Benefits of gender and racial diversity in nonprofits. Evidence suggests that being inclusive of different people at the decision-making table in organizations is significant to meeting goals. Winston (2001) suggested “institutions that are rated most highly effective in terms of diversity are also highly rated in relation to other measures of organizational success” (p. 524). Pease (2003) reported on the importance of race and ethnicity in nonprofit organizations and noted although being inclusive may be “the right thing to do,” it has become a necessity for organizational success. Diversity linked to performance is the understanding that a more diverse and inclusive work environment can yield greater productivity and improve individual and organizational performance (Kreitz, 2008).

The Pease (2003) study stated:

As the United States has grown increasingly ethnically diverse, many in the corporate sector have come to realize that inclusiveness of communities of color is no longer just “the right thing to do” – it is now both a moral and business imperative. Similarly, this report demonstrates that highly inclusive nonprofit organizations also understand that becoming inclusive truly makes a difference in their ability to accomplish their mission. (p. 5)

Interestingly, another finding revealed that people of color are more involved in philanthropic giving and that the sector is missing out on revenue to assist in moving forward in their mission. This is what is meant by inclusiveness not just being the right thing to do, but that it is good for business. More research is needed to examine inclusivity and its impact on philanthropic giving. Although the social sector has
multiple outcomes to consider in its goal attainment, fiscal sustainability is just as important as social and human capital.

Lennon (2013) conducted an extensive research study on the leadership of women in 14 sectors. The 14 sectors include academia, arts and entertainment, business and commercial banking, entrepreneurship, journalism and media, K-12 education, law, medicine, military, the nonprofit and philanthropic sector, politics and government, religion, sports, as well as technology. The descriptive study, sought out top 10 organizations in the social sector and gathered public information available on original source data sites, annual reports, and proxy statements. Findings from the 2012 report revealed that there was a tremendous gap in compensation, and underrepresentation of women in CEO leadership positions and as board members. The authors noted that women were well represented in social entrepreneurship. Success was attributed to the fact that social entrepreneurship lacks structural and institutional barriers and lacks gatekeepers. Recommendations for future action included increasing diversity for boards and executive staff, particularly with women of color. Areas of future research were to conduct a comparative study of nonprofits with small and large budgets to examine promotion and compensation processes and practices.

Many studies have discussed the deficit in leadership at nonprofits and the need to fill the gaps to ensure successful transition of leadership. Despite the research on best practices to fill the shortage and the importance of diversity at the decision-making table, there has been a failure to act. The underrepresentation of women and people of color is evident and needs to be addressed to tackle the social ills of this country in a sustainable
manner. Diversity in gender, race, and class allow for a better collection of leaders needed for the future of effective nonprofits.

The literature review addresses the readiness for African American women to lead. Reporting on the educational attainment of African American women gives the reader background information of the credentials obtained by women who seek management level positions. Educational attainment appears to be important to African American women based on the numbers reported year after year. Challenges faced and strategies of advancement used were also explored. This aided in shaping the study and guided the researcher to areas that speak to the solution of the problem presented.

**Untapped Resources to Fill the Leadership Gap**

**Educational attainment of African American women.** African American women have been a part of the educational landscape for centuries. Prior to the Civil War, all women, regardless of race, were at a disadvantage in educational attainment (Zamani, 2003). Even after the institution of slavery was abolished, educational opportunities would be far and few between. In recent decades, educational statistics have shown that when given opportunity, African American women take the need for education seriously.

A visible change has occurred in the composition of the college going population and includes the increased enrollment of individuals that were excluded from attending college due to their racial, ethnic, gender and socioeconomic background (Zamani, 2003). While overall, all women surpass their male counterparts in receiving college education, Black women lead their male counterparts at higher rates than any other group in America (Guerra, 2013; National Coalition on Black Civic Participation, 2014). The
Center for American Progress reports since 2004 educational attainment for Black women has increased, but at a slower rate than White women and in 2010, 21.4% African American women received a Bachelor’s degree or higher compared to 30% of White women. It is also worth mentioning that the number of doctoral degrees have also increased since 2000 by 47% for Black students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012).

Thomas-Breitfeld and Kunreuther (2017) posit there are more similarities than differences in the background and preparation between White and people of color as it pertains to being qualified and having aspirations to lead in the nonprofit sector. They note that people of color are as ready as Whites to take on leadership roles, but they face unspoken and unconscious biases that prevent those with hiring power from fairly assessing, recognizing, and valuing their potential. There is the sense of invisibility as it pertains to social and human capital opportunities in the workplace.

**Challenges faced by African American women.** Challenges for African American women do not start with adulthood. Epstein, Blake, and Gonzalez (2017) conducted a study on the disparate treatment of Black girls in public systems. Their study included a scale that was comprised of items associated with adultification and stereotypes about Black women and girls. Similar to a study done about Black boys by Goff in 2014, they divided the period of childhood and adolescence into four age brackets: 0-4, 5-9, 10-14, and 15-19 years old. The research surveyed 325 adults from various racial and ethnic backgrounds and different educational levels across the United States who were recruited through an online service to obtain a community sample of typical adults. Participants were predominantly White (74%) and female (62%). Thirty-
nine percent (39%) were 25-34 years old. Information regarding respondents’ occupations was not assessed, but 69% held a degree beyond a high school diploma. Compared to White girls of the same age, survey participants perceived that (a) Black girls need less nurturing, (b) Black girls need less protection, (c) Black girls needed to be supported less, (d) Black girls need to be comforted less, (e) Black girls are more independent, (f) Black girls know more about adult topics, and (g) Black girls know more about sex. These attitudes of Black girls turn into attitudes of Black women, like the “angry Black women” and other stereotypes that are implicitly attached to colleagues in various institutions. Societal expectations discourage displays of anger, even appropriately assertive behavior, by underrepresented minorities (Grier & Cobbs, 2000).

African American women have always led in the participation of the labor workforce, but have had to face numerous challenges and obstacles along the way. Although, Black women have higher education levels and are more likely to hold managerial positions, Black men earn more than Black women. In 2014, the National Coalition on Black Civic Participation reported although Black women lead working, they face intensified levels of unequal pay and unemployment challenges, while making 68 cents on the dollar to their White male counterparts. Eagly (2007) cited “One illustrative national study followed workers from 1980 to 1992 and found that White men were more likely to attain managerial positions than White women, Black men and Black women” (para. 12). In a 2012 study conducted with African American and White women, they agreed that the glass ceiling is a reality of organizational life, while African American women were more likely to report this as a significant barrier to advancement (Key et al., 2012). In a study conducted by Davis and Maldonado (2015) African
American women attributed their lack of advancement to issues of race and gender in academia. The participants voiced that the intersection of race and gender affected their advancement in leadership positions. As previously mentioned, there appears the sense of invisibility as it pertains to social and human capital opportunities in the workplace for African American women.

No longer are minority groups faced with blatant racism or sexual discrimination, it is an undertone that permeates and influences the decision making and interactions in the workplace and is to the detriment of the minority group (Ritenhouse, 2013; Sturm, 2001). Research studies have revealed that across disciplines African American women are facing unique challenges in their workplace, educational, and community environments. Difficulties faced include racial bias, racial microaggressions, gender discrimination, home/work life balance, and lack of role models (Robinson-Wood et al., 2015; Truscott, Proctor, Albritton, Matthews, & Daniel, 2014). In many cases the absence of the availability of a role model and/or mentor, cross-race or cross gender, or otherwise, results in Black female scholars searching for these opportunities outside their own institutions (Jones & Osbourne-Lampkin, 2013). Individuals’ promotions at work can be varied depending on the strategies for climbing the ladder to professional success and types of organizational barriers (Lyness & Thompson, 2000). The greatest barrier in promotion within any company is faced by women, especially non-White women (Lyness & Thompson, 2000).

According to a phenomenological study conducted by Robinson-Wood et al. (2015) of 17 African American women, it was revealed that microaggressions occurred in student development, counseling, and psychology graduate programs that all had a
history of promoting mental health of people from stigmatized groups and advocating for social justice. As relational human beings, microaggressions are predominately harmful to women in work spaces and classroom environments (Robinson-Wood et al., 2015). The aforementioned study connects to the idea of challenges faced by African American women in the labor force.

Moreover, a national survey by the Center for Talent Innovation was conducted online in June 2014 among 788 White women and 356 Black women between the ages of 21 and 64 currently employed in certain white-collar occupations, with at least a bachelor’s degree (Hewlett & Green, 2015). Black women are 2.8 times as likely as White women to aspire to a powerful position with a prestigious title. This study informed the reader that leadership is the goal for many Black women, but they are continuously overlooked. Forty percent of Black women have clear long-term goals and 43% stated they were confident in their abilities to be executives compared to approximately 30% of White women in both categories.

This sheds light on the fact that Black women lack sponsors, their contributions go unrecognized and there is a belief that their hard work will eventually just pay off. However, Purdie-Vaughns (2015) studied stereotypes, and examined how people’s brains are biased to ignore Black women. She states when many think about “Black executives,” they visualize Black men. When they think about “female executives,” they visualize White women. Because Black women are not seen as typical of the categories “Black” or “woman,” people’s brains fail to include them in both categories. Black women suffer from a “now you see them now you don’t” effect in the workplace (Purdie-Vaughns, 2015).
Lennon (2013) reported that executive talent pools are usually small circles and acquaintances. This illustrates the importance of social and human capital for African American women and highlights one aspect that contributes to the concrete ceiling. Shari Hubert, Associate Dean of Admissions at the Georgetown University shared in an interview about *Lean In* that women of color often have an even higher hurdle to overcome in the workplace and are more invisible than their White counterparts. She adds, because of the invisibility factor, sponsorship is even more important and that there is a need to prove intellect and capability, thus focusing a disproportionate amount of time on performance forgetting that image and exposure are equally important. The cultural taxation placed on women of color in leadership positions can affect the opportunities for growth. It is imperative that organizational leaders truly understand the dynamics that leadership can bring to historically marginalized groups like Black women.

Studies continue to show that the challenges faced by African American women must be addressed. Women of color reported different experiences than their White counterparts in nonprofit and for-profit sectors (Bell & Nkomo, 2003; O’Neill, 1994). Per Lloyd-Jones (2009), a double standard surfaces for African American women, when race and gender converge, which reduces access to leadership positions and generates an uncertainty about their ability to lead. As one continues to delve into the research there appears to be a mirror of dominance that is evident in the nonprofit sector, academia, and the corporate world of work. Although challenges do exist, some women transcend the obstacles and acquire positions of power, it is just not representative of the U.S. population. These routes are not direct approaches to promotion, but over time, one sees
changes and progresses to the desired outcome necessary to satisfy one’s needs (Ryan, Haslam, & Postmes, 2007; Eagly & Carli, 2007).

**Career development and pathways of African American women.** Black women have used many different strategies to create a pathway in the labor force. Greenwald (1990) discussed how Black women used tight labor markets (during war times) to move to more flexible jobs. Shortages have allowed for opportunities for women and Black women proved themselves in such a way that when the shortage was over, they were kept on permanently or promoted.

Unions formed in the 19th century due to the social and economic impact of the Industrial Revolution. Black labor unionism became part of a wider campaign for civil rights after World War II (Cassidy, 1997). African American civil rights groups sought redress through court cases under Title VII Equal Employment Opportunity, of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which prohibits discrimination in employment based on race, color, sex, or national origin. Black women who are covered under collective bargaining agreements make higher wages and have greater access to benefits than women of all races or ethnicities who are non-unionized (National Coalition on Black Civic Participation, 2014). Unlike the suffrage march in 1913, this was an inclusive social justice outcome.

Professional and career development has evolved as businesses, organizations and educational institutions gain more and more understanding about human capital. Many pathways and opportunities can be developed formally or in an informal manner. Nonprofits have a difficult time because of budget constraints investing in formal professional development programs (Gregory & Howard, 2009).
In a 2009 qualitative study, Bridgespan interviewed six nonprofit senior managers (four women and two men), on how to successfully develop oneself into a nonprofit leader. The themes revealed were (a) volunteering within and/or outside of your organization, (b) continuing education, (c) thinking big and connecting skills to different areas of the same field, (d) joining professional networking groups and associations, (e) moving up by moving on, and (f) being involved with informal and formal peer networks.

Jones and Osborne-Lampkin (2013), completed a qualitative, evaluative study to explore satisfaction of a professional development boot camp specifically for Black women faculty. Black junior scholars were given mentors as an opportunity to gain access to important networks and help alleviate challenges perceived in academia (Jones & Osbourne, 2013). This same study noted that specific needs were met through their involvement in the professional development boot camp. The needs met were (a) the need for community, (b) research development and assistance, and (c) development of personal and professional action steps for success. “Traditional socialization activities, while essential, fail to address the intersection of being Black and female,” (Jones & Osborn-Lampkin, p. 69).

Even though there is a limited amount of literature on the career development and pathways for African American women specifically in nonprofits; research has shown that formal and informal networks are important. African American women in senior level management positions have identified strategies that assisted them to get to where they are today. This researcher will explore the perceived obstacles and strategies used by African Americans who have obtained positions of power. In order to examine this aspect in women’s leadership a variety of theoretical frameworks helped conceptualize
the research study. The next section will discuss research studies, methods and other pertinent information that will assisted in developing the study. The major theory utilized was the Black feminist framework because it is connected to the population that was studied. The knowledge gained can successfully guide the right leaders to assist in filling the shortage of executive leaders.

**Chapter Summary**

This literature review was designed to promote an understanding of the need for the current research study. Continuous growth is noted in the nonprofit field for diversity, leadership, and approaches to career advancement. It is important to expand on the exploration of African American women considering the challenges and opportunities that are foreseen in the shortage of leaders. The examination of this topic allows for a new talent pool to address social problems and make a global impact. As previously stated, many strategies have been presented and recommendations for further research have been shared. More research is needed on the factors that impact the navigation of African American women into nonprofit senior level positions.

The literature presented assisted the researcher in exploring factors that impact the phenomena of the lack of representation of African American women in executive positions in social service agencies. The theoretical framework used to explore this topic is Collins’ (2002) Black feminist thought. The aforesaid theoretical framework relates to the idea of race and gender and how that may play a role in career choices by studying African American women specifically.

As nonprofit organizations face challenges in meeting the needs of a diverse client population along with the predicted wave of retirements; organizational leadership will
need to find a way to address the opportunity for the leadership growth of African American women (Norton & Linnell, 2014; Tierney, 2006). Research suggests that there are gender differences in leadership styles (Northouse, 2016). The differences noted may be an advantage to women leading in the social sector (Eagly & Carli, 2007). To address the impending and continuous demand for leadership, it is important that African American women are sought to fill the gap. African American women and their lived experiences add to the human perspective in advocating for social justice issues because of the intersection of race, gender, and class, that are dealt with daily.

Black women continue to sharpen the sword and hone in on skills through their educational attainment. Similarly, professional development opportunities allow for a cultivation of skills, knowledge, and abilities. Contrarily, African American women who aspire to obtain senior level positions appear to be overlooked time and time again. There is a dissonance from the call of action that the literature reveals and the pathway of leadership needed for women of color. It is important for professionals to know the bias that exists and tackle it head on. Jones (2000) defined institutionalized racism as differential access to the goods, services, and opportunities of society by race. It is embedded within institutions’ practices and policies and cannot be connected to a single offender. This is continuous, even with enormous evidence and need, through the inactivity of those who have the power to make it known and attempt change among institutions. Jones (2001) offered ways to face this challenge through (a) leadership consensus, (b) community conversation, and (c) action to dismantle. Black women continue to overcome challenges faced.
Several researchers noted that women identified imperative obstacles that they felt were out of their realm of control and required a change in the mindset of employers and the workplace climate (Catalyst, 1999; Krivkovich, Kutcher, & Yee, 2016; Piazza, 2016). The Catalyst (2002), studied promotions in corporate management and saw a steady rise in the promotion for women of color. African American women must recognize the power of their voice and embrace opportunities that may be different than strategies used in the past. There are women who have made it and they offer insight. A review of the literature finds that few studies have explored the experiences of women who have assumed leadership positions and that there is a marked absence of research that focuses on the experiences of African American women who have ascended to leadership roles in a variety of fields (Bell, 1990; Lyness & Thompson 2000; Parker & Ogilvie, 1996; Stanley, 2009).

The blueprint for success is needed to cultivate those with aspirations in leadership. Navigating the labyrinth of leadership is hard to do alone. By embracing innovative strategies of African American women, this study connects the current leaders and decision makers to trailblazers who will change the world for future generations to come. This study focused on African American women who are already in senior level management positions in the social sector. The purpose of this study was to add to the body of knowledge on what African American women consider when obtaining senior level management positions at nonprofit organizations. The more insight on the perspective of a diverse group in leadership may help organizations reach their missions and empower the people who are involved. Exclusively examining African American women serves to describe their experiences and perceptions when faced with challenges
and explore strategies used to acquire an executive position. This study provides information gained from the perspective of Black women through conversations that are supported by research data.

This study will be of professional significance because to have an effective organization, diversity in leadership must be a part of the equation. The underrepresentation of African American women in nonprofit leadership is a disservice to the social sector industry. The absence of diversity allows for untapped, talented, and capable individuals to be kept from accomplishing the missions set by nonprofit agencies to address social justice issues in the communities they serve. Northouse (2016) stated “this larger and more demographically diverse pool of candidates not only makes it easier to find talented people, but it also facilitates greater levels of organizational success” (p. 409). This dissertation study was designed to help make known the leadership strategies of African American women and educate organizational leaders on the importance of limiting bias that exists.

Chapter 3 will discuss the research design and methodology deemed appropriate for the study. The chapter provides the research context for the research, identifies the study participants, describes the data collection instrument, and discusses the data collection instruments and analysis processes and procedures.
Chapter 3: Research Design Methodology

Introduction

In the last decade, many studies have been conducted on women in leadership. From the glass ceiling to the labyrinth, these phrases have been coined to depict the gender issues women have had to deal with in executive management positions (Eagly & Carli, 2007; U.S. Glass Ceiling Commission, 1995). In addition, several studies have attempted to examine leadership in the social sector (Carman et al., 2010; Froelich et al., 2011; Hiland, 2015; Tierney, 2006). There is a rising need for leadership in the nonprofit sector due to the number of leaders retiring in the field (Johnson 2009; Tierney, 2006). Yet, there is an untapped resource that needs exploration if the problem is to be alleviated. Few of these studies have examined leadership specifically for women who are African American and in the nonprofit sector.

To address this gap and understand the phenomenon from the individuals’ perspective, this researcher conducted a phenomenological study of seven African American women in senior level management positions of nonprofit organizations. This phenomenological research study was an effort to gain insight into the obstacles faced and strategies used by African American women in senior-level management positions of nonprofit organizations located in the New York metropolitan area.

Research questions for this study were:

1. What challenges, if any, do African American women face in obtaining senior level management positions of nonprofit agencies?
2. What strategies facilitated the attainment of executive positions among African American women in social sector organizations?

This study sought to identify possible obstacles in obtaining executive positions in nonprofits for African American women. It is important to examine the career pathways of African American women (Cain, 2015; McKinsey-Mabry, 2011). Lack of succession planning, the absence of diversity in talent pools, limited understanding of the dynamics between board-chair and executive director relationships are just a few of the challenges faced by the nonprofit field (Carman et al., 2010; Froelich et al., 2011; Hiland, 2015; Tierney, 2006). Researching the aforementioned may help to inform best practices in leadership development. To achieve leadership diversity, it is imperative to understand the experiences of African American women who advance to the executive level within nonprofits.

A phenomenological qualitative research design was chosen to understand the lived experiences of African American women in executive leadership positions in nonprofits. Qualitative research is a field of inquiry in a complex and interconnected family of concepts, terms, and subject matter (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Qualitative research involves collecting data using a variety of materials such as personal experiences, life stories, case studies, and observations (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Phenomenology is defined as the study of human lived experiences of individuals with regard to a particular phenomenon being examined (Moustakas, 1994; Nueman, 2000).

Based on the fact that African American women have historically been understudied, the researcher took a transformative approach in examining the issue. The transformative approach is described as a research method utilized for social justice
transformation (Creswell, 2014; Mertens, 2010; Schensul & Berg, 2004). This framework focuses on addressing social problems and injustices, conducting research and working to resolve the possible problem with those directly affected (Schensul & Berg, 2004). Using the transformative lens is applicable across disciplines, and research methods, and produces skills that can assist a variety of communities that experience discrimination (Mertens, 2010; Schensul & Berg, 2004). This was the framework featured for analysis and the formulation of conclusions.

This section will provide information of the research design and methodology that was used to examine the research questions for the study. An overview of research context, participants, and data collection with analysis is discussed.

**Research Context**

The National Center for Charitable Statistics reported in 2016 there were 1.6 million nonprofit organizations in the US. GuideStar (2017) reports that there are 1.8 million active tax-exempt nonprofits and organizations in the United States. The sector has not shown any signs of slowing down. Two of the top five states with the highest number of nonprofits are in the Northeast region. The Census Bureau has defined the northeast region as comprising nine states: from northeast to southwest, they are Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Connecticut, New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania. The two states with the highest number of nonprofits are New York and Pennsylvania, with each state having close to 100,000 organizations classified as a 501c(3). This study sought AAW leaders in New York City’s five boroughs – Manhattan, Bronx, Queens, Brooklyn, Staten Island, and its surrounding areas. The surrounding area includes Westchester, Rockland, and Nassau Counties.
Research in the last decade indicates that, while African American women have been graduating from college at a higher rate than their counterparts and have always been a strength in the labor force, there is an underrepresentation in executive positions in nonprofit human service organizations (Kaba, 2005; Lennon, 2013; Norton & Linnell, 2014; Zamani, 2003). Sandberg (2013) stated that just 30 years ago, for the first-time women made up 50% of all college graduates in the United States. The researcher focused on African American female executive leaders of nonprofits who serve the New York metropolitan area. New York state has over 97,000 nonprofit establishments that employ 1.2 million people.

There is an underrepresentation of African American women in leadership positions despite their many advancements in American society. For example, in the corporate setting Fortune magazine has touted its highest level of female CEOs of Fortune 500 companies in its history, a mere 6.4% (32) and of that less than 1% (two) were women of color. Communities are increasingly changing and the demographics of areas being served by organizations are shifting to people of color. As the demographics change, agencies will need to develop the capacity to cultivate and hire diverse staff (Norton & Linnell, 2014; Pease, 2003). Several survey results consistently indicate less than 20% of executives/CEOs of nonprofits are people of color and this has not changed for over a decade (Thomas-Breitfeld & Kunreuther, 2017). Nonprofit organizations face significant challenges in meeting the needs of a diverse client population. This is not a case for the inability of current organizational leaders to serve a diverse population, but more of a focus on inclusivity and proportionality in leadership through service by diversifying the talent pool of candidates. The predicted wave of retirements will push
organizational administrators to find ways to address the shortage, which can serve as an opportunity for the leadership growth of African American women (Norton & Linnell, 2014; Tierney, 2006).

**Positionality.** Positionality is an important aspect in qualitative research and in social science inquiry as an exploration of the investigator’s reflection on one’s own placement within identities and subjectivities of viewpoint (England, 1994). Researcher positionality is a consideration in the interpretation of the findings (Merriam, 2009). Patton (2005) stresses the importance of the researcher acknowledging and understanding any biases the researcher may have, and working to avoid any negative effects these biases may present during the research process.

In this study, the researcher can be someone perceived as empathetic because of her identity as an African American woman and her position as a leader at a nonprofit agency. The researcher and subjects are employed at agencies with a common thread of social justice missions, which may add to the insider positionality of the researcher. This is the inside positionality of the researcher. This positionality may aid in developing an increased connectedness, and standpoint, and generate a greater trust the research participants (Herr & Anderson, 2005; Horvat, 2013). An insider positionality allows for an increased sharing of information during the semi-structured interview.

However, the researcher is not at an executive management level and environments of nonprofits in the New York metropolitan area are different from the researcher’s agency location. The researcher has actively sought out senior level managers who are members of the Black Agency Executives (BAE) organization and the researcher is not a member of the organization. Although potential subjects and the
researcher may have crossed paths professionally, there has been no personal engagement with the participants.

**Research Participants and Recruitment Procedures**

To reach exclusively African American women who work in human services, the researcher reached out to the Black Agency Executives (BAE) organization. The organization has a public membership directory that was used to recruit. This group was selected as a participant source because of its mission related to the support and professional development of African American senior level managers, specifically in human services. This association has an extensive peer network in which an appropriate sample size of seven were interviewed for the phenomenological study.

The participants were self-identified Black women who are currently working in a C-Suite position for a nonprofit in the New York Metropolitan area with an operating budget of $1 million or more. There were approximately 50 members and nearly 30 of them were women. Although eight women responded, seven were selected because they met the selection criteria. One who responded did not meet the operational budget criteria. The literature throughout this document, further conveys the rarity of Black women leaders in the field.

Black Agency Executives is a nonprofit organization dedicated to the support and professional development of its membership, which represents Black human services executives who promote the interests and values of the Black community. Founded in 1976, BAE is dedicated to the support and professional development of Black human service, nonprofit executives which in turn positively impact their staff, customers,
organizations, and communities they serve. These executives promote the interest, values, welfare and empowerment of the Black community.

A sample size of seven interviewees were selected. In phenomenological study researchers share that saturation can be reached anywhere from six to 10 participants (Creswell, 2014; Morse 2000). The researcher asked African American women executive leaders who were participating in the study to solicit other women who could speak directly to the research questions. Secured participants were asked to give the researcher’s contact information to other potential subjects, as well.

**Recruitment procedures.** After the Institutional Review Board approved the study, the following explains the step-by-step process of engaging participants for the research study.

Step 1: Distribution. A prescreening questionnaire (Appendix B) and letter of introduction (Appendix C) was distributed via e-mail by the researcher to the BAE public membership list located on the BAE Website.

Step 2: Online platform. The prescreening questionnaire was sent through a link from Google Forms provided by St. John Fisher College e-mail.

Step 3. Response. Participants recieved an e-mail with the link to the letter of introduction and survey was approved by the Institutional Review Board. The outcome was eight respondants.

Step 4. Selection. Once the prescreening questionnaire was completed, seven individuals were selected from a pool of respondents who met the following criteria: (a) self-identify as Black, (b) are female, and (c) are working at a nonprofit as a senior level
manager with a minimum operational budget of one million dollars. One respondent did not meet the minimum operational budget requirement.

Step 5. Contact. Once the prescreening questionnaire was completed and seven individuals were selected from the respondents, the researcher e-mailed an informed consent form (Appendix D) to those who stated they would like to participate. Participants were once again made aware of the purpose and conditions of the study. Involvement in this research study was voluntary and subjects were told that they can discontinue at any time without penalty.

Step 6. Interview. There was one face to face interview and six telephone interviews that took no more than one hour. Prior to the interview a review of the informed consent was completed and a demographic information questionnaire (Appendix E) administered in order to create a profile of each participant. The interviews were digitally recorded for data analysis.

To maintain confidentiality, a list of the research subjects is not included in any reporting materials used. Other considerations to privacy include the deletion of identifying information. Participants information is kept in a password protected file for three years and will deleted permanently.

**Instruments Used in Data Collection**

Data collection instruments chosen include a recruitment questionnaire, demographic questionnaire and an interview protocol. Google Forms, a computer software program, was used to distribute the questionnaire and for participant selection. The demographic questionnaire was administered prior to the interview to ascertain
information for the participant’s profile. The interview protocol elicited responses from participants to gain an understanding of the lived experience of the participants.

**Questionnaires.** This researcher utilized two types of questionnaires to identify the sample and collect data for each participant’s profile. A questionnaire permits the investigator to receive preliminary material on each participant, assess the appropriateness for the participant’s involvement in the study, and gauge how they may inform the research problem and possible solution. The recruitment questionnaire was administered electronically. There was also a demographic questionnaire administered at the time of the interview to create a profile of the participant. Computer software programs that assist in data security, collection, and insight include Google Forms. Academic research programs using technology can map data and benefits the researcher in use of time (Qualtrics.com, 2016). Google Forms was the most cost-effective choice because it is the program St. John Fisher College uses and provides to all students.

**Interview protocol.** The theory based interview questions were structured to capture the perception of African American women who have successfully navigated the labyrinth of leadership in the nonprofit sector (Appendix F). The interview questions have been adapted from similar studies concerning women, leadership, and diversity. Semi-structured, open-ended, and theory based interview questions allowed participants to provide historical and rich information that led to the essence and understanding of the experiences for analysis. The protocol gave consistency to the researcher in the analysis process.

**Expert panel.** A panel of five experts reviewed the semi-structured interview questions. The panel was utilized to account for validity, especially as it related to the
semi-structured interview questions. To ensure that the method investigates what it intends to investigate, the members of the panel were tapped because of their experience as African American women in nonprofit leadership positions. The panel included (a) current chief financial officer, (b) a former chief compliance officer, (c) a current director of early childhood education (d) a current executive director and founder and (e) a current executive director. Each member was sent an e-mail inviting them to serve as a panel member, and the e-mail included an overview of the study and the proposed questions for the study. Panel members gave feedback on the organization and construction of the questions. Any changes to the protocol were based on the feedback given by the panel members.

**Procedures for Data Collection and Analysis**

For this study, the researcher interviewed seven African American women in leadership positions at various nonprofit agencies in the New York metropolitan area. The focus of this study examined the perceived challenges and strategies used by African American women in the leadership development of each of the participants. The researcher conducted interviews utilizing questions developed and designed to elicit information from interviewees on obstacles encountered on their journeys to executive level administrative positions in nonprofits. The discussions were digitally recorded and sent to an independent transcriber. The researcher ensured no identifying information was included in the recordings sent.

The following steps were taken to organize and analyze the data transcribed. Data analysis is the systematic procedure to identifying essential features and relationships through interpretation (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996; Groenewald, 2004).
Step 1. Immersion. The researcher read and examined all data from the transcriptions in detail.

Step 2. Segmenting. The researcher examined pre-existing codes as it related to the theoretical framework, the research problem, and the research questions. This allowed for a content analysis from the contextual material received through the process.

Step 3. Coding. Analysis of the data for significant statements, meaning units, textual and structural descriptions and description of the experience are all characteristics for a phenomenological study (Creswell, 2014).

Step 4. Emergence of themes and patterns. The analysis of the data revealed themes from the interviews.

The researcher used Microsoft Word to create a codebook which assisted in the organization, review, and analysis of data. The aforementioned also allowed for the necessary data management throughout the collection and analysis process.

To maintain trustworthiness of the information, the examiner utilized the process of member-checking during the interview process as an analytic method. Intra-coding involves another coder using the codes identified for the same passages in the transcribed text. The intra coder has a social science background and experience in qualitative methods of research. Member checking is a procedure that gives the subject an opportunity to comment on the interviewers understanding as well as elaborate on their own original statements (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015).

Research findings are reported in a narrative format. This conveys information by giving context to the experiences shared. This type of reporting assists in giving voice to a marginalized group of people. Emergent themes are explicated in a way in which the
research question is directly addressed and conclusions reflected to data retrieved from the subject. Reports are also comprised of charts and tables. Some descriptive statistics shared include the age range of participants, years in the position, amongst other demographic information. The visual aids assist in shaping the information collected in a systematic way.

**Summary**

The purpose of the research study was to explore the lived experiences of African American women and how they have developed as leaders in the social sector. The major theoretical rationales utilized are social capital theory and Black feminist thought. This transformative approach gives voice to a marginalized group and can assist in working with other groups of people combating social injustices. In order to gain insight from the leaders’ experiences, a phenomenological approach was deemed most appropriate to collect and interpret data on the topic.

Chapter 3 has given an overview of the research study methodology. The sections outlined included research context, population to be studied, instruments for data collection and the procedures for data analysis. Information shared explicated the connection and justification of the method used to questions posed. Chapter 4 will review the research questions, report findings and summarize results of the study.
Chapter 4: Results

Research Questions

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to examine the lived experiences of African American women’s perceived challenges and strategies used to obtain an executive leadership position within the social sector. The participants were asked a series of semi-structured questions that were created to elicit responses that would answer two research questions. The semi-structured questions were developed from the theoretical framework of Black feminist thought (Collins, 1993) and social capital theory (Coleman, 1986; James, 2000; Lin, 2000). Guided by theory-based research questions, this study investigated the blueprint of success in navigating the leadership labyrinth for African American women, specifically in nonprofit organizations. Research questions for this study are:

1. What, if any, challenges do African American women face in obtaining senior level management positions of nonprofit agencies?

2. What strategies facilitated the attainment of executive level positions among African American women to in social sector organizations?

The chapter is organized by research findings and major themes that were identified by the participants. African American executives’ experiences and perspectives give voice through their personal narratives. Their stories convey the challenges faced and strategies used in their own words. Participants described their career pathways, reflected on their work experiences, and shared their thoughts on
executive leadership in the social sector. Quotes from the interviews were used to capture the perspective of the participants and provide major themes that surfaced during the interviews.

**Data Analysis and Findings**

To capture the lived experiences of the participants, semi-structured interviews were conducted. In all, seven interviews were conducted with participants in the New York metropolitan area. Six of the interviews were completed via teleconference and one was completed face to face in a private location. This section provides the major findings of the study, and both a statistical snapshot and brief biographic information of each of the seven participants to familiarize the reader with their background. Tables 4.1 and 4.2 provide information on descriptive characteristics.

**Descriptive analysis and participant profiles.** The researcher used the recruitment and demographic questionnaire to construct biographical overviews of each participant. The participants from the study were from the New York metropolitan area and provided a variety of professional, educational, and previous fields of practice. All seven African American women currently serve in executive positions at nonprofit agencies. Table 4.1 provides an overview of the participant’s agency operational budget, number of employees, and years in their current position at the organization. All seven participants had between 25-99 employees at their location.

GuideStar (2015) reports that even with the number of female CEOs increasing since 2001 for nonprofit organizations of all sizes, only 16% of organizations with a budget of more than $50 million have female CEOs. Three participants led organizations with operational budgets of $5 to $10 million, two led organizations with a budget of $1
to $2.5 million, one led an organization with a budget of $10 to $25 million and another led an organization with a budget greater than $50 million.

Table 4.1

*Demographic Profile of the Executive Participants*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Race</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Self-Identified Black</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Female</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Operational Budget</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• $1 – 2.5 million</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• $5 - $10 million</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• $10 - $25 million</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• &gt; $50 million</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years in Current Executive Position</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• &lt; Year</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• 1-3 Years</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• 3-5 Years</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• &gt;10 Years</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Employees</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• 25-99 employees at location</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Title</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Chief Academic Officer</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Executive Director</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• President and CEO</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• 46-55 Years Old</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• 56-65 Years Old</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• 66 and older</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level of Education</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Master’s Degree</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Terminal Degree (Ed.D, Ph.D., J.D.)</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Research participants varied in years of experience in their roles as executive leaders of their current organizations. Two participants served in their positions for over 10 years, two served for 3-5 years, two have served for 1-3 years and one participant
served less than 1 year in her current position. The ages of the participants ranged from mid-40s to over 66 years of age with three of the seven in the 46-55 age bracket and two in the age bracket of 56-65 and 66 and older, as shown in Table 4.1. Regarding educational attainment, Table 4.1 demonstrates that four of the seven participants have earned a terminal degree and three have earned master’s degrees.

Given the range of executives participating in the interviews, Table 4.2 provides a disaggregated outline according to the participant’s operational budget, years in current position, the number of employees, title, age, and educational attainment. Each participant was identified by a letter designation. PA was participant one, PB was participant two. The remaining participants were PC, PD, PE, PF, and PG.

The level of experience and responsibility is evident in the participants. They all had high level responsibilities for individuals in their organizations and the financial magnitude of their operations was also significant. They all had completed higher education and also had years of working experience. Significantly, through the interviews, all participants reported a desire to have a positive impact on the population being served. While this finding was not a key to answering a specific research question in this study, this allows for readers to understand the context and mindset of participants, which is worth noting. This was usually referenced as the reason why the human service sector has become the participant’s life’s work now.
Table 4.2

*Itemized Description of African American Participants*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>African American Women Executives</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>PA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Operational Budget</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$1 – 2.5 million</td>
<td>√</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$5 - $10 million</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$10 - $25 million</td>
<td>√</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt;$50 million</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years in Current Executive Position</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt; 1 Year</td>
<td>√</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-3 Years</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3-5 Years</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt;10 Years</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Employees</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25-99 Employees</td>
<td>√</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Title</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chief Academic Officer</td>
<td>√</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Executive Director</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>President and CEO</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>46-55 Years Old</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>56-65 Years Old</td>
<td>√</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>66 and older</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level of Education</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Masters</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terminal Degree</td>
<td>√</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Participant A.** Participant A served as the Chief Academic Officer for a nonprofit education organization that supports public schools by working directly with teachers, school leaders, and the community to create the types of institutions children need to succeed. She had 26 years of experience in the social sector. Her experience in executive leadership spanned approximately 20 years. Participant A shared: “I started off as a teacher, just turned out to be really good at it. Then realized that I could probably
impact more people, both in terms of colleagues, students and families if I pursued a leadership position.”

**Participant B.** Participant B was Executive Director of a community based organization started by community residents to strengthen the growth and development of individual families. The agency operates programs in education, employment, economic development, housing, health, and social welfare. Her work in the nonprofit arena extended over 50 years. Participant B stated:

I first started out as a teacher and was very active in my own community. I was elected to my church’s school board, became president of my local missionary society, area chair, and then Sunday school superintendent. I was this, that, and a whole lot of stuff, just doing community work because you want to better the community. So, all of that leads to being a successful nonprofit executive.

**Participant C.** Participant C served as the Executive Director for a child advocacy organization that works to level the playing field for all the nation’s children. Policies and programs that address poverty, quality education, abuse, and neglect are just a few of the focuses the organization champions. She had 30 years of executive experience and 40 years in human services. Participant C reported:

At a very early age, I wanted to be engaged in work that helped the less fortunate. I grew up in a low-income minority household and deeply appreciated the impediments and obstacles to success that children in those circumstances face. I wanted to work to remediate those obstacles to the extent that I could.

**Participant D.** Participant D was the Executive Director for an early childhood education program which incorporates community and family engagement for positive
outcomes and school readiness for children and families. She had 30 years of experience
in the social sector and for 22 of those years she served as an executive leader.

Participant D indicated:

I've always been interested in working with families, children, and helping people
with social work, which led me to the nonprofit sector. I had a desire to help. I'm
invested in people, I love people and that drove to me to wanting to work with
people. I like challenges and the struggle because I think if one person can do it
that, if something can happen for one person, it can happen for another.

Participant E. Participant E served as the Executive Director for an antipoverty
policy and advocacy network. The network of human service agencies strives for
creating shared prosperity, advancing upward mobility, and reducing poverty in the
metropolitan area. She had approximately 10 years of experience in the social sector and
as an executive. Participant E stated:

I never thought about the nonprofit sector as a career choice. I actually thought
about the work that I wanted to do, and then through the years there were different
places and sectors where it was most advantageous to do the work. My decision
was not informed by wanting to be in a particular sector, but really my career
decision has been informed by the work that I want to do, and the places and
spaces where I believe I can be most impactful in doing it. I graduated law school
and began working in the field of poverty-fighting work in an executive office.

Participant F. Participant F was the Executive Director of an arts education
program. This organization delivers services internationally to engage children through
the unique power of the arts to motivate them to personal excellence, and develop a
passion for learning and love of the arts. She had 30 years of experience in the social sector. Her experience in executive leadership extended almost 15 years. Participant F expressed the following:

I have done a lot of volunteering and I had been working in the private sector, an opportunity came up with philanthropy at a private foundation. I was pretty interested in learning more about the work that they do, and particularly with communities of color. Also, I had not started out in the nonprofit sector, I had skills that were transferrable, so it really was just an opportunity for me to look a little more deeply at my interest in working and serving the community.

Participant G. Participant G was the President and Chief Executive Officer of a nonprofit that helps mobilize communities, build opportunities, and eliminate barriers to improve the lives of those who are low income. She had over 11 years of experience in the nonprofit sector. Participant G shared how she was introduced to the nonprofit sector. She stated:

My mom was in the nonprofit sector, so I grew up, with a deep appreciation for the sector and the kind of work that was being done, that could be done, and the impact that it could have on the communities that I cared about. We didn't grow up with the Wall Street Journal and not even Black Enterprise, it was social justice we were protesting and everything else. (At the corporate law firm) I learned a lot and I also taught a lot, I fought a lot for Black people as well. And being in the corporate world for 10 years, helped me really understand what my job needed to be in the social justice movement, that it was about economic empowerment. And, how do we understand the juxtaposition between capital
markets, poverty, and these other issues. It was very valuable and useful. But I was always headed here, but, I had to go a path to get here.

**Cross analysis of participant interviews.** Once interviews were completed and transcribed, all data was cross referenced and it was determined that there were four major themes related to the challenges experienced by African American women in nonprofits. The interviews also revealed nine major themes of strategies used by African American women in executive leadership of nonprofits. The themes were derived from the participants’ reports on their journey and insight on executive leadership in the social sector. The findings are interrelated and will clarify how African American women experience challenges and have employed strategies in their leadership trajectory.

The participants’ quotes were chosen because they are able to speak to all theoretical aspects mentioned in this study which include (a) intersectionality, (b) black feminist thought, (c) social capital, and (d) human capital. Intersectionality is reviewed in order to introduce the reader to the multidimensional aspects of one person. The intersection of race and gender places African American women in a unique category and positions them to experience the effects associated with being African American and women (Collins, 2002; Crenshaw, 1989). Several theories speak to organizations, their structure of leadership, and the connection to career advancement. The major theories utilized in this study, as it pertains to organizational culture, were social capital and human capital theory. Appendix A explicates the major themes of each theory and their connection to one another in the career pathways of African American women.

**Research question 1.** What challenges, if any, do African American women face when obtaining an executive level position in a nonprofit organization? Themes that
emerged as challenges are listed in Table 4.3 along with a description of the theme. The four major themes are (a) negative feedback, (b) perception of leadership, (c) fiscal solvency, and (d) compensation. This research question was answered by participants and shared from a personal and business analysis lens. The aforementioned themes shed light on the lack of psychological support and personal struggles experienced by participants. Self-disclosure was extremely important in this process. This section explicates the types of marginalization that took place along their leadership journey.

Table 4.3

*Four Major Themes of Challenges Reported by African American Female Nonprofit Executives*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Negative Feedback</td>
<td>Unsupportive behavior experienced, including one’s own mindset, that was not conducive to a thriving leadership environment and/or towards a leadership goal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perception of Leadership</td>
<td>This is a reference to how a participant may perceive themselves and how others perceive the participant as a leader. At times causing a questioning of how to “show-up” for the position.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fiscal Solvency</td>
<td>Expression of uneasiness about agency sustainability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compensation</td>
<td>A concern about monies received for services rendered by participant</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Negative feedback.** Negative feedback in and of itself is a very broad term and can mean different things to different people. All participants revealed that they have experienced negativity on their journey. This type of feedback can come from ones’ self or from others in the participant’s life. Table 4.4 provides examples shared by
participants of when they themselves had an instance of negative self-talk and how others may have discouraged, undermined, or discounted them as a leader.

Table 4.4

Negative Feedback Data Collected Based on Interviews of African American Female Nonprofit Executives

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Quote</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Negative Feedback</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>I was in one of those accelerated classes where you combine the 11th and 12th grade and graduate a year early with your regent's classes, when I started that year the high school that I attended got a new principal. That principal removed me from the regent's classes and suggested to me that my aspirations were not realistic. That I wasn't college material. (PC)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>We all, in our lives, encounter people who may, diminish, or discount what we do or our value. And the key is to kind of rise above that (PF)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>I remember very early on we were doing some community economic development deal with this big White developer and I was saying this is not going to work, and the White man stood up and leans across the table and starts yelling at me with his finger. And I'm so baffled by the whole thing, does he think he's intimidating me? There's this mindset of this is who you are and this is who I am and this is how I can behave. So, learning how to deal with that, is something you must learn how to do. You can stand up and scream back. That's not really my style, you can't get me that upset. So just really trying to figure out how to address that because that's kind of an inevitable thing (PG).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>One challenge would be myself, (asking myself) Like can you really do this? What about your kids, what about this, what about that? No, yes, no (PA)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>There were some barriers because I had to decide to leave. I never thought about being in an executive level position. I mean there were times I would say, “What the heck am I doing over here?” But it was very, that was difficult just getting into that position because I never thought of myself as being an executive director. Once I took the position, I spent many days in the office crying, I said “Why'd I do this? &quot;And I would go into my secret closet every day and did a lot of crying but I had to pull myself together. (PD)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>As the boss or as the leader, one wonders if it is because of how I show up? How I engage with people and how I create space for mistakes? And I'm constantly working to manage through. (PE)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 4.4 displays examples of interviews extracted from participants reflection of negative feedback given by others. During the interviews, all seven reported an experience related to not being supported during their journey, whether from a colleague, supervisor, or through negative self-talk. Four of the seven participants described a time of a questioning of one’s self in their high level roles.

Research supports the influence of negative feedback from self or others. Barsh and Yee (2011) posits, of all the forces that hold women back none are as powerful as entrenched beliefs. They found that many women hold limiting beliefs that stand in their own way – such as waiting to fill in more skills or just waiting to be asked. Imposter phenomena/syndrome has been defined as a mindset that is a powerful factor in the choice of women to move forward and upward. Clance and Imes (1978) have defined the term imposter phenomenon to be used to designate an internal experience of intellectual phonies, which appears to be particularly prevalent and intense among a select sample of high achieving women. Roche (2014) writes the “imposter syndrome is blind, in the sense that it can strike anyone, even White male CEOs. Nevertheless, it’s particularly prevalent among women, minorities, and from less privileged socioeconomic backgrounds” (pp. 14-15).

Negative feedback from others can be a challenge as well. Difficulties faced include racial bias, racial micro aggressions, gender discrimination, home/work life balance, and lack of role models (Robinson-Wood et al., 2015; Truscott et al., 2014). As relational human beings, micro aggressions are predominately harmful to women in work spaces and classroom environments (Robinson-Wood et al., 2015). However, there appears to be an added layer of complexity when micro-aggressions are coming from a
person that reflects you as a Black woman. This was shared by two participants in this study. One participant reflected,

> We were all tasked with overseeing certain divisions, and my responsibility seemed broader because I was overseeing contracted services and she kept telling me I shouldn't complain, because my compensation was the same. And I was fairly sure that the compensation, while important wasn't the most important issue to me, that if I was doing the same work as the men – then I was entitled to have the same position description, which commanded, or at least appeared to command, greater authority. (PC)

The theme of negative feedback from self and others is supported by the existing literature.

**Perception of leadership.** What is an executive leader supposed to look like?

Due to centuries of structural and institutional racism, the image of leadership has been White and male. Although there have been policies and laws that have been put into place, there are still effects and implicit bias that people exhibit. Table 4.5 provides a selection of quotes from interviews that expressed how perception can be a challenge as a leader and a Black woman. Perception and image were mentioned by all seven participants. The participants contemplated experiences having to do with the perception of leadership. Interviews revealed that executive leadership may come with a preconceived image of a White and/or male counterpart and that image is very important to stakeholders.
Table 4.5

*The Perception of Leadership Interview Data Collected from African American Female Nonprofit Executives*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Quote</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Perception</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>To earn it and to maintain it, you must be careful about what you do, how you act socially…it’s how you're perceived. It's a lot. You've got to be careful what you put on there (social media) because everybody is looking at it. (PB)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>The perception of people of color in general, and Black women and Black men in particular, is such that you're forced to, present yourself in a way that doesn't threaten the people that you're confronting or engaging. (PC)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>I have people think that I was not the executive director or the CEO. They assume that someone I'm with, or some board members or staff, that they are the leader of the organization. I've had that happen many times (PF)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>There's an assumption that, as a woman leader, you need some man to manage the finances and the operations and that's kind of the rule, but you can be inspirational and you can be a great speaker and, kind of, out front and represent but a male figure needs to manage the finances. It was interesting because some of the women leaders have stated, even though we know that you understand the business and you can run the business, you need to have a male, just so that it makes people feel more comfortable. And I thought that's troubling. (PG)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Research supports the challenge of perception in leadership. Purdie-Vaughns (2015) studied stereotypes, and examined how people’s brains are biased to ignore Black women. She states when many think about “Black executives,” they visualize Black men. When they think about “female executives,” they visualize White women. Because Black
women are not seen as typical of the categories “Black” or “woman,” people’s brains fail to include them in both categories. Black women suffer from a “now you see them now you don’t” effect in the workplace (Purdie-Vaughns, 2015).

Lloyd-Jones (2009) stated there are double standards that surface for African American women. When race and gender converge, this reduces access to leadership positions and can generate an uncertainty about the ability to lead. Women of color reported different experiences in nonprofit and for-profit sectors than their White counterparts (Bell & Nkomo, 2003; O’Neill, 1994). Not being treated, recognized, or acknowledged as the executive of your company is a challenge, at times. As the reader continues to delve into the research there appears to be a mirror of dominance that is evident in the nonprofit sector, academia, and the corporate world of work. Bias as it pertains to the image of a leader can be an obstacle. This finding is supported by the literature.

**Fiscal solvency.** Table 4.6 also provides an example of how the lack of having relationships with funding sources can be frustrating and present a barrier to success at a nonprofit, putting into question one’s fit for the position and/or organization. Six of the seven participants reported on the challenges associated with fiscal solvency.
Table 4.6

Fiscal Solvency Data Collected from African American Female Nonprofit Executives

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Quote</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fiscal Solvency</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>In one executive position, I obtained I had to get involved in politics. It was very scandalous. And they were giving us so much money, I just had a bad feeling. Something happened with the money and wasn't feeling good about the money, I ended up leaving. (PA)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>There's no money in it. Once I got there, there were a lot of obstacles. No money in the program. It was already burdened down with a lot of debt. We spent our own money, getting the supplies and things. Lack of funding and no money was a challenge. I never thought that we'd be able to sustain. (PD)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Resource development aspect of being a leader in the social sector is huge. It's a challenge. It can be, frustrating, depressing and not making sense. And I think a lot of CEOs/Executive Directors, will talk about it as, the part of their job that they dislike the most. I do think the model of how we resource and finance to support the very, very important work that's being done is wrong, it's broken. It shouldn't be people feeling like they're begging people to support these worthy causes. It's really an investment, in our community, our city, in our country that is necessary and is everybody's responsibility. Everybody benefits. So let’s try to make it happen in ways that make sense. (PG)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fiscal solvency is an important issue. Two of interviewees shared experiences in which the money management of an organization seemed questionable and as a result they made the decision to leave. Women are less likely to condone or engage in corrupt behavior (Eckel & Grossman, 1998; Swamy et al., 2001). Although financial challenges
were experienced, decisions were made to self-advocate or remove themselves for the situation. This finding is supported by the literature.

Sustainability for nonprofits has been an important aspect of the field. Researchers have noted the shift of nonprofits to adopt a business model for sustainability (Collins, 2005; Dart, 2004; Froelich, 1999; Weisbrod, 1998). A variety of triggers include unpredictability of individual contributions, mandates of private donors, and varied political leadership and policy initiatives have influenced nonprofits to diversify (Froelich, 1999). More and more, clients and customers have become the primary income providers in the nonprofit sector, and this places the burden on the people who need the resources, but may not have the means to get services that are not subsidized.

The for-profit business model has a history of organizational executives that are White men. There have been concerns raised by researchers about the impact this can have on fairness, justice, and democratic ideals that do not match entrepreneurialism and satisfying individual clients’ self-interest (Box 1999; Box et al., 2001; deLeon & Denhardt, 2000; Denhardt & Denhardt 2000; King et al., 1998; Terry, 1998). What will this mean for the people who are served? Annie E. Casey Foundation indicated at least 60% of nonprofits serve people of color. They are also more challenged by inadequate salaries, the need for role models, lack of social capital/networks, and the need for relationships with funding sources.

Compensation. Compensation has been defined as money, or payment meant to give someone a fair exchange for their effort and output (Vocabulary.com, 2017). If you receive fair compensation for your work, the money is equal to your time and effort. Pay
equity continues to be at the forefront as an advocacy concern for women. Table 4.7 offers an example of how inequity can be demonstrated in pay.

Table 4.7

*Compensation Data Collected from African American Female Nonprofit Executives*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Quote</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Compensation</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>I was consulting for a company and they wanted me to come on as a full-time staff because their attorney had this epiphany that I couldn't manage a portfolio of a hundred million dollars’ worth of grants and be a consultant. So, I did come on as an employee and during the course of my employment I discovered that my compensation level was significantly lower than, a couple of employees, who had less responsibility (PC)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.7 indicates two of the seven participants experienced concerns about compensation of the services they provided to an organization.

As it pertains to compensation, Black women have higher education levels and are more likely to hold managerial positions, yet Black men earn more than Black women. In 2014, the National Center for Black Civic Engagement reported although Black women lead working, they face intensified levels of unequal pay and unemployment challenges, all while making 68 cents on the dollar to their White male counterparts. This study supports the findings in literature of the wage gap for Black women.

**Research question 2.** What strategies facilitated the attainment of an executive position in the social sector? Themes that emerged as strategies are listed in Table 4.8 along with a description of the theme. The six major themes are (a) positive feedback, (b)
professional development and academic advancement, (c) connection to culture, (d) unsolicited opportunity, (e) mentoring/sponsorship, and (f) trailblazing. There were many more strategies identified by the participants as possible solutions to the issues as compared to the amount of obstacles they faced. The quotes t

Table 4.8

Six Major Themes of Strategies Reported by Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Positive Feedback</td>
<td>Moral, social and inspiring support that was given to participants encountered during their career pathway</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic Advancement and Professional Expertise Training</td>
<td>Any mention of educational attainment and unceasing procurement of on and off the job transferrable skills development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connection to Culture</td>
<td>Any reference to one’s self identification as a Black women and linkage to values, beliefs, culture and community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunity</td>
<td>A position that may have been undesired, unplanned, unthought-of of to pursue, but assisted in a participant’s leadership trajectory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mentoring and Sponsorship</td>
<td>A direct link to a position through recognized talent and level of excellence, encouragement to pursue a position, and connections through networking to get the position</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trailblazing</td>
<td>To be the only or limited number of people pioneering, starting and/or being the first to achieve a particular goal or concept while in an executive position</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Positive feedback. The impact of encouragement and support from different people was made evident by the participants. Some may have been colleagues or family members. This was demonstrated in moments remembered and may have been done continuously depending on the relationship with the participant. Examples are shown in Table 4.9.
Table 4.9

*Positive Feedback Data Collected from African American Female Nonprofit Executives*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Quote</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Positive Feedback</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>There were a lot of people around me who were encouraging me to grow more so than me encouraging myself. I think I've had good mentors that really push me along. I've had people who just look out and kind of directed me, &quot;You should check this out or you should try that&quot;. (PA)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>In another instance, there was a woman who encouraged me to start my own business, there are these people who come to you and talk to you about where you are in your career pathway, and who help you think through other opportunities that you might want to pursue. And I took a leap of faith and started my own business, which thrived for about 10 years. (PC)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>One should be resilient, be professional and needs support through other channels to navigate and that's where your mentors, and friends, and supporters come in. (PE)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.9 illustrates that all seven participants experienced encouragement from others. Participants could recall someone recognizing their talent and encouraging them to pursue a position. Forms of positive feedback included family and community members rallying behind a participant through encouragement and actions to assist in the success of leadership task.

Research supports the impact of positive feedback. Social capital resources represent the quality of relationships with peers, subordinates, and superiors which enhance the likelihood of beneficial returns, such as career advancement and promotions, higher earnings or bonuses, along with better mental health and psychological support.
(Coleman, 1990; James, 2000; Lin, 2000). The review of the literature suggests that African American women rely on relationships (i.e., mentoring and sponsorship) to help succeed in business and academia, but little is known about the nonprofit sector (Davis, 2012; Jones & Osbourne-Lampkin, 2013). The findings in this study support that relationships can be utilized to help succeed in the nonprofit sector, as well.

**Academic advancement and professional expertise training.** All participants stated they have continued their education, beyond their degrees. The procurement of professional development was mainly self-initiated and pursued through nontraditional pathways in degree attainment. In some instances, trainings were introduced by their employers. There was a drive to do and learn more in the field. Table 4.10 provides insight on the narratives shared by participants on the topic of professional development.

Table 4.10 presents examples in which participants shared that professional development and continuous learning attributed to their success. Many of the participants shared that educational attainment and professional development was a part of their pathway to executive leadership. All seven participants reported that a majority of the time it was self-initiated pursuit.

Research supports the need for continuous learning. Nonprofits have a difficult time because of budget constraints investing in formal professional development programs (The Bridgespan Group, 2015). Investing in leadership capacity, evaluating management compensation, board participation in succession planning, and exploring new talent pools have all been identified as ways to close the leadership gap in nonprofit (Johnson, 2009; Tierney, 2006). This study supports the findings in existing literature
about educational attainment and human capital investment from organizations, which
may assist in filling the gap in nonprofit leadership.

Table 4.10

*Professional Development and Academic Advancement Data Collected from African American Female Nonprofit Executives*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Quote</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Professional Development</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>I just wanted to relax and be in the classroom and not have to make any decisions for a couple of hours. And just continued to learn. This is important (a) from a networking standpoint, and (b) continuing to grow in my craft and getting exposed to other people who are like minded. (PA)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>I left school. I dropped out of school, for about a year, took a different path, left home, worked but read the books (the teacher suggested) and decided to go back to school in a larger city, to be able to complete my education with the regent's courses. I graduated from a SUNY Institution and then law school. (PC)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>I graduated from community college when I younger and then went to a SUNY institution then I went to school for my masters. So, it took me till I was in my 40s to get a degree. But I was always moving forward. In fact, I felt that I had skills and needed the education, also. There were a lot of conferences and staff developments I participated in. I went to training social service workers called social service competency based training. My boss initiated it, but also once I started learning I wanted to learn more and more. (PD)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>I've had a coach for many years, a woman who, had been in the corporate sector basically her entire career and then she does organizational development, personal development and coaching. I have attended professional development trainings on a variety of things like data and evaluation measurement. I am a student and I'm always trying to learn and kind of plug into those kinds of opportunities. They were all self-initiated. But, I have tried to figure out how to leverage this across the organization. So we developed a relationship with a foundation that ultimately paid for about 15 people of my staff to go to a leadership development training (PG)</td>
</tr>
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</table>

*Connection to culture.* Acknowledgment of the participants identity as Black women was an important element that emerged from the interviews. Although there was
adversity connected to their identity, it was also used as a source of strength. Table 4.11 displays examples of their contemplations. All seven participants discussed working with marginalized groups and how opportunity may have been undesirable for others in the field. The quotes displayed were reflective moments by Participants A, B, C, and G.

Research supports the importance of the connection to culture. Annie E. Casey Foundation indicated at least 60% of nonprofits serve people of color. Per Collins (2002), Black feminist thought encompasses three major key components. First is intersectionality which involves the interlocking types of oppression (race, gender, sexuality, and class) and the acknowledging that all areas affect one’s life simultaneously. Second comprised of embracing Afrocentrism and allowing one’s culture and experience to inform one’s practice. Participants shared how involvement in their community, church, and even their own experience as part of the group they now work with led them to want to work with social justice issues as a career choice. This sense of culture was dangerous to express in the past, but now is being shared, acknowledged, and has informed their practice as executives.
### Table 4.11

**Connection to Culture Data Collected from Interviews of African American Female Nonprofit Executives**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Quote</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Connections to Culture</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>I’m a graduate of an HBCU and that is very important to me. If you go to a school like I went to school they're going to instill some things into you. They're going to instill some responsibility in you, to yourself, to your race, to your people. And so that stays with me. That stays with me and that's why when I hear or face adversity, I remember what I was taught by my father more so and my folks back in the day. I remember that, I am very clear about that. It is a heavy load, it is a responsibility. (PA)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>In the '70s. I believe it was called The American Association of Black Child Development, I was very active in that. I was able to meet, Asa Hilliard, James Young. I was able to meet all these cutting-edge psychologists and leaders, in the black movement. So, that just really was instrumental in me just saying, you know, &quot;I really can do it.&quot; It was just, being part of that movement that really made me keep focus of what I needed to do. (PB)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>When you grow up, during a period of time when students of color were tracked into vocational educations you had to have a certain skillset to be able to navigate so that you would be eligible to take what they call regent's courses--in New York State. You can't go to college unless you take them back in the 60's they would track young people of color into vocational education, which precluded your opportunity to take regent's classes people of color back in the 60's and 70's, were presumed to be academically deficient. So, you were consistently navigating a less than receptive environment to be able to be successful, and the kind of skills that you needed to do that, are the same skills that you need to manage in the world or to manage an organization. (PC)</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>I got more exposure and I spent one summer in law school working at the a nonprofit legal service organization and one summer working at the most profitable law firm in the country. And I got offers when I graduated to work at both and I was telling my mom, “what do you think I should do?” And she said &quot;you should go to the law firm&quot;. And what she said is &quot;you should go to the law firm because there are things that you need to get from that experience. That you need to bring back to the community&quot; and she said &quot;but there are also things you need to bring&quot; she said &quot;because I'm sure they have not experienced somebody quite like you” (PG)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Finally, Collins (2002) includes self-actualization, which is realization of personal potential, seeking personal growth and peak experiences. Interviewees recognized that there may be a struggle, but moved forward seeing the potential in the work that had to be done and what it could mean to others. Throughout the course of the interviews self-actualization was made evident through the stories of perseverance, self-advocacy, and determination. Although many experienced negative feedback through self-doubt or others, they continued the journey to leadership. The findings are supported by existing research.

**Unsolicited opportunity.** Most participants shared they were introduced to leadership opportunities by happenstance. These were opportunities that were unsolicited. However, the participants possessed an openness to see where the opportunity could take them and the organization. Table 4.12 shows samples of quotes pertaining to opportunities during their leadership journey.

Four out of the seven participants stated how opportunities presented themselves even when unsolicited. Table 4.12 shares portions of participant responses germane to being prepared to take on a position, once presented with a prospect. The participants in this study explained how undesired, unplanned, and unthought of career opportunities were presented in a variety of experiences. Although others did not want the position at hand participants were flexible enough to see an opportunity to gain skills, utilize their skills to build the organization’s potential, and continue to make an impact.
Table 4.12

*Unsolicited and Openness to Opportunity Data Collected from Interviews of African American Female Nonprofit Executives*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Quote</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Opportunities</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>I wasn't certified. But they were still taking teachers because I had enough credits to teach mathematics and there was a shortage. I went to a district in Harlem, no one else wanted to teach there. (PA)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>I would say that I believed that I was selected for that position because of my competencies, but when you put it in perspective I was the youngest, newest attorney, and who the heck wanted to go to Northern part of the U.S.? Nobody really. So, I stumbled into management because probably at least I surmised no one else wanted it, but it gave me an opportunity to acquire the skills necessary. (PC)</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>It was really a challenge because the center was getting ready to close up. But this program needed someone to pull it together. It wasn't anything that was desirable for anybody. There's no money in it, but I could see the potential. I could see what it could be. And that's why I took it, I came to that position, because nobody would want it (PD)</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>I've lived in California. I've lived in the south. I've lived on the East Coast, and I've been willing to travel, to take on new opportunities, and you can do that when you're young, so I would encourage people to just take advantage of opportunities. (PF)</td>
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</table>

One must be open to opportunity. Sellers (2009) posits that successful leaders have their vision in the peripheral, so they can see when opportunities come along and swing that way. It can be a lateral move and allows for a broadened experience base. This can change quickly (Sellers, 2009). These routes are not direct approaches to promotion, but over time, one sees changes and progresses to the desired outcome.
necessary to satisfy one’s needs (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Ryan et al., 2007). This existing literature supports the emerged theme of unsolicited opportunity and an openness to take advantage of them.

*Mentoring and sponsorship.* Social capital materialized as a theme based on the narratives shared. As demonstrated in the examples in Table 4.13, having a person or networks with access provide guidance to a position can better the chance one would acquire the position. Table 4.13 presents examples that were extrapolated from participant interviews to demonstrate how relationships have impacted participants’ ascension to leadership. Across the span of interviews, mentoring and sponsorship emerged as a theme. All seven participants reported having a mentor and/or sponsor that connected them to an employment opportunity and provided support.

Narratives of formal and informal networks that were exclusive of people of color were noted. Four of the seven participants noted the importance of diversity in their network, as well. Diversity included ethnic/racial backgrounds, fields of interests, and even geographic variety in their network, although many participants stated men and women were mentors. Men were normally identified as a direct connection to an executive position acquired. Sponsors were also identified as people who were not of the same race, as well. Participant C, came to this realization in the midst of the interview which is illustrated in Table 4.13.
Table 4.13

*Mentoring and Sponsorship Data Collected from Interviews of African American Female Nonprofit Executives*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Quote</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mentoring/ Sponsorship</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>I could go on and on, but the long and short of it is just people that I have met and people that I have worked with, networking, helping and then recommending me. For years I never really applied for a job (PA)</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>I was at that court for about 10 years and he called me, and he said, &quot;Oh, you know, there's this great opportunity for this fabulous program that will do a lot of data, analysis, policy, advocacy and scaling of programs, you ought to apply for it.&quot; And I was saying, &quot;Ah, you know, I don't know. I'm pretty good here in the court. You know, there's not a problem that comes up that I don't think I can resolve.&quot; And he said, &quot;That's exactly the issue.&quot; greater challenges, and I want you to interview for this position as executive director of this nonprofit.&quot; Actually, this is interesting. It's a lot of guys which is really bizarre! (PC)</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>I have had people, through the years who have mentored me and who I count as trusted confidantes, counselors, people who provide guidance, and are a sounding board. A cabinet of people to whom you can go, and in whom you can confide and get direction. They run the gamut, Black, White, Latino, and Asian. They range in age. I have people who are my contemporaries. I have people who are retired. I have people maybe a half generation above me. I have people who are in the same field as I am. I have people who are in business. I have people who are in law. I have people who are thought leaders, some are leaders, some are doers. It's the full gamut, because I believe that you have to learn from a variety of people, and you need different perspectives. To help inform your thinking, and how you show up. (PE)</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Generally, people I've worked with in large institutions, worked for or worked side by side. Some are local, and some are people I've worked with in other parts of the country. Generally, the ones that I'm closest to are Black. Although, that doesn't have to be the case. They're available to me when I have those challenges, professional opportunities, or I'm trying to figure something out and need their input. (PF)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Other women, Black women, leaders in the space, the generation, older than me, that certainly took an interest and I actively solicited, their support and guidance. (PG)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Research validates the need for mentorship and sponsorship. Jones and Osborne-Lampkin (2013) completed a qualitative, evaluative study to explore satisfaction of a professional development boot camp specifically for Black women faculty. Black junior scholars were given mentors as an opportunity to gain access to important networks and help alleviate challenges perceived in academia (Jones & Osbourne-Lampkin, 2013). This same study noted that specific needs of (a) community, (b) research development and assistance, and (c) development of personal and professional action steps for success were met through their involvement. In some instances, having a diverse group of people categorized as mentors and sponsors have helped in their journey to success. Through encouragement, recommendation, and/or being at the decision-making table, men were a strong influence. Traditional socialization activities, while essential, fail to address the intersection of being Black and female, (Jones & Osborn-Lampkin, 2013).

Lennon (2013) posits that “up to now, nonprofits have tended to draw their leaders from a relatively small circle of friends and acquaintances” (p. 32). Davis (2012) notes that sponsorship for African American women was received from people who did not share the same gender or racial identities of the participants. As previously mentioned, social capital resources represent the quality of relationships with peers, subordinates and superiors which enhances the likelihood of beneficial returns, such as career advancement and promotions, higher earnings or bonuses, along with better mental health and psychological support (Coleman, 1990; James, 2000; Lin, 2000). The theme of mentoring and sponsorship emerged and was supported by the existing research. This includes the need for a diverse set of individuals to assist in executive position attainment.
**Trailblazing.** Five of the seven participants shared narratives of completing a first or having to start from scratch, during their journey. Table 4.14 give occurrences discussed by participants.

Table 4.14

*Trailblazing Data Collected from Interviews of African American Female Nonprofit Executives*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Quote</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Trailblazing</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>I was involved when there were very few Blacks and Latinos as math coordinators in the city at the time. During my tenure at one position, I ended up participating in building a learning corridor, which is kind of unusual connection with college and K-12, this was acknowledged by the mayor and governor at the time. (PA)</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Well, starting 50 years ago it was really not that much of a career choice a Black woman could really make in terms of being an executive. And I always wanted to be an executive. I was the 1st Black Jr buyer for department store. I went to an immigrant community in China Town and became the first Black director of one of their programs. (PB)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>I was selected and had the privilege of opening a legal service in the mid-west serving the rural poor and Native Americans on a reservation. (PC)</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>In the beginning, there were a lot of obstacles, the board was non-functioning. We started from scratch and I got all those skills from working at my previous agency. If it's something that you're building from the very beginning, you make it your own. This allowed for creativity. We started male involvement when I became executive director. (PD)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>I was the second Black woman to work at that firm, in the history of that firm, as a lawyer. I am the first women to lead the nonprofit agency I am currently in. (PG)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As noted previously, trailblazing is defined as being the only or part of the limited number of people pioneering, starting and/or being the first to achieve a goal or concept while in an executive position. Five of the seven interviews revealed this theme as exhibited in Table 4.14. Two of the seven participants shared that this allowed for creativity. Participants were either chosen to start up an agency, satellite site, or founded a concept used for the first time at the organization. Black women have used many different strategies to create a career pathway.

Black women have been trailblazers. Black women have used many different strategies to create a pathway in the labor force. Greenwald (1990) discussed how Black women used tight labor markets (during war times) to move to more flexible jobs. Shortages have allowed for opportunities for women and Black women proved themselves in such a way that when the shortage was over, they were kept on permanently or promoted.

**Additional findings.** All participants shared advice for aspiring leaders. These were shared by all participants. The leadership characteristics conveyed describe the skill set and competencies needed by past and present executive leaders. Participants informed this researcher that they are needed and still relevant for aspiring executives, as well. The following thoughts were discussed. Participant A stated: “Emerging leaders should be thinking about, what do I bring to the table? What is it I think I can contribute, or what did I think I can learn? It's not always that you want to do something.” Participant B specified,

You have to lay the groundwork and you have to go to work. You really have to do the work to do and be whatever it is that you want to be. It just becomes part
of your life, it's more than a job. You've got to have a passion to do this here non-profit stuff. Because it's 24/7.

Participant C stated,

I would suggest very strongly to them that they try to identify, other women of color in higher executive positions and seek out their advice and counsel. I know that I very intentionally, have identified women who appear in an upward trajectory – and talk to them about, what I see in them that's positive, what they should build on, how they should approach their careers, and what kind of opportunities they should look for. That should be exploited my younger women who have aspirations. Most women, most Black women in executive positions are more than willing, to help lift up and support, promising young African American or women of color.

Participant D claimed,

I think first I would tell them to try to learn as much as they can learn. Because a lot of time this younger generation, they think they know it all, which they basically don't. Just listen, listen, sometimes just be quiet and be observant and take in the surroundings around you and just listen. I would advise them to get whatever education they could get and take whatever opportunities they can. I think having a vision. See what the potential could be, see what you could do with a certain organization or, especially if it's grassroots. Because I think I'm always thinking “what's next or what you can do to make it even better?”

Participant E advised,
Aspiring leaders should follow, continuously work to hone and be in pursuit of their passion. First and foremost, you can't really lead effectively if you are not committed, not driven and motivated by the work that needs to be done. So pursue your passion, don't just have a goal of leadership, because you want to be a leader. I meet many young women, and especially a lot of young women of color who say they just want to be leaders. They want that status but without necessarily being clear about why. What it is that they really want to do and their goals. I think it's important to have a broad perspective. Not just different organizations, but different sectors, different types of work, and different cultures that are at play and that can help me to form who you are and how you want to show up. I think it's important to have a very diverse network. Because you know those people who look like you cannot always get you to where you need to be and aren't necessarily going to be the ones who are going to be at the table, where you want and need to be. So, diversity in your cabinet is critically important and then most of all, I think being reflective, in honest reflections with yourself and where necessary, being critical. That doesn't mean that it takes away from your competence, or your abilities

Participant F reported:

I think it's important to get involved, work with, either volunteer or some capacity, organization you might ultimately like to be a part of so you understand how they run. They have junior boards. They have young leader boards. They have volunteer committees, and getting a feel for the sector. I think one needs to really sort of make sure that they have their leadership skills in place, and their
communication skills are strong, financial management skills are strong, and if they're not, go learn how to strengthen them. It takes time to get to these positions. It doesn't happen overnight, and so assume that hard work is a part of it. I also think being flexible is really important, both professionally and geographically, a position that may be in another state or another part of the country, but be able to embrace it and go with it. Try not to be too rooted or rigid about a career pursuit, because sometimes opportunities come, and from different places than you expect.

Participant G advised:

The advice I would give is to make sure that you have your network of supporters, your group of people who are gonna tell you what you need to know about yourself, about your leadership, about what's going on in the marketplace, and just be very deliberate and pick people, bring them together, tell them this is what they are to you, and really engage them. I think that the second thing is that it comes just from my mindset of always being a learner. Like to have that child's mind. To be curious, don't feel like, because you know, you're on this path that you have to project, that you know everything. Be open to learning all the time. Next is to make sure the self-care, take care of your health. Do the things that are important to you. This whole throw yourself into the work because it's so important and you lose yourself is not good for the work. Because you're not your best and we don't get the longevity and you need to be your strongest you in order to get the work done.
Summary of Results

Chapter 4 presented the research questions that guided this qualitative phenomenological study. It also presented the data gathered by the researcher in conducting semi-structured interviews with seven African American women in the executive level leaders in nonprofits located in the New York metropolitan area. From the data gathered, themes of their leadership attainment emerged. The themes that emerged answered what obstacles are present and what strategies were used to attain executive positions within nonprofit organizations.

Four major themes were identified related to obstacles perceived by women to advancing into executive leadership positions of nonprofits: (a) negative feedback (b) the perception of leadership (c) fiscal solvency and (d) compensation. Six major themes were identified as strategies used for the rules of engagement when navigating the labyrinth of leadership: (a) positive feedback (b) continuous learning and professional development (c) connection to culture (d) taking advantage opportunity (e) mentoring and sponsorship as well as, (f) trailblazing.

Chapter 5 identifies the implications and limitations of the study. The chapter concludes with recommendations for various stakeholders including organizational leaders and aspiring executives. Suggestions for further studies will be reported, as well.
Chapter 5: Discussion

Introduction

Chapter 5 will present the implications of this qualitative study. Next, the limitations of the research are discussed and recommendations for changes in structures, policies, and practices are provided. Ideas on future research based on the analysis are offered, as well. Finally, the researcher provides conclusions and final thoughts on the study.

The nonprofit sector employs more African Americans than government agencies or for-profit businesses (Halpern, 2006). According to The White House Project (2009), the nonprofit sector comprises approximately 6% of the overall workforce, with 73% of nonprofit employees being women. Even in a discipline generally dominated by women and claiming to be diverse, African American women are underrepresented in executive positions compared to their White counterparts (Cornelius et al., 2011; Halpern, 2006; Lennon, 2013). According to Thomas-Breitfeld and Kunreuther (2017), the percentage of people of color in nonprofit executive director roles has remained under 20% for the past decade. The authors also posit, to increase the number of people of color leading nonprofits, the sector needs a new narrative about the problem and new strategies to address it. Nonprofits must transfer the responsibility for the racial leadership gap from individuals to organizations. Many researchers have made known the lack of diversity at top positions in many sectors (Pease, 2003; Thomas-Breitfeld & Kunreuther, 2017).
Lack of people of color in top leadership roles has been identified as a structural problem for the nonprofit sector (Thomas-Breitfeld & Kunreuther, 2017).

African American women have faced a number of challenges in the world of work. From the glass ceiling, to the labyrinth, and most recently the jungle gym – these phrases have been coined for a depiction of how women had to deal with gender issues in leadership. One could argue that African American women in organizations experience restrictions in their pathway to leadership positions based on their race, social class, and gender. Some have argued these factors may be deemed negative when considering the educational, social positions, and economic status of African American women (Byrd, 2009; Kaba, 2008; Zamani, 2003). Various researchers have classified the aforesaid as the “concrete ceiling.” Even with the factors mentioned, African American women have enrolled in college, attained degrees, and possess managerial and professional positions more than any of their male counterparts; and yet they get paid less (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Kaba, 2005; Zamani, 2003).

There is limited research on African American women and their successful journey into nonprofit executive leadership. Researchers clearly document the issues of promotion in corporate and academic settings for African American women, but little is known about the nonprofit sector. Some African American women make it to the upper echelon in the social sector, despite the challenges that persist. Hence, there are several factors that affect leadership attainment for African American women.

This study created an opportunity for Black women to tell their experiences of navigating the leadership pipeline to executive ranks in the social sector. This study used a phenomenological research design to interpret the findings. The significance of this
research design was that it allowed for the exploration of a particular phenomenon from the perspective of its participants based on their lived experiences (Creswell, 2014). The research design assisted in the analysis and development of themes gleaned from the participants’ narratives. A semi-structured interview protocol was used to aid the African American women executives in sharing their stories. The participants included seven African American women who were executives at nonprofits located in the New York metropolitan area.

This study adds to existing, although limited research on African American women leaders, specifically in the social sector. The study focused on the factors, themes, and experiences that lead African American women to successful attainment of C-suite positions in nonprofits. The purpose of this study was to gain insight into the challenges faced and strategies used by African American women in executive positions of nonprofits. Social capital theory and Black feminist thought were used as the theoretical frameworks that provided the researcher with the lens with which to frame the research.

Implications of Findings

The study expanded on the limited literature that is available on African American women and leadership. The first question focused on the perceived challenges of African American women in their attainment of executive positions in nonprofits. This question led to several themes that in most cases supported the existing literature review.

Research question 1: What, if any, challenges are faced by African American women in obtaining senior level management positions of nonprofit agencies? Overall, four challenges emerged from the semi-structured interview with the participants: (a)
negative feedback, (b) challenges in the perception of leadership, (c) fiscal solvency, and (d) compensation.

**Negative feedback.** These African American women executives in nonprofits reported that negative feedback from others and even themselves was evident in their journey. The participants clearly stated they all experienced unsupportive behavior from others and even had episodes of self-doubt. During the interviews, 100% of the participants in the study indicated that this behavior was a challenge in their leadership journey. The participants explained how others did not value, or tried to diminish the work they were doing.

Here is how one of the participants expressed her recollection of negative feedback from others: “My husband and everybody was like what are you doing- It was everybody. Why are you doing this? It was about an organization that needed some help” (PD). Participant E stated,

I've seen when White males are in a leadership role and people will jump through hoops trying to figure out how to complete that directive. I have had situations where people are pushing back or not delivering, and I wonder, hmm, is that because I'm a, a woman. Is that because I'm a Black woman? Is it cultural to the institution, or is it because of who I am?

Negative feedback from others can be a challenge. Difficulties faced include racial bias, racial micro aggressions, gender discrimination, home/work life balance, and lack of role models (Robinson-Wood et al., 2015; Truscott et al., 2014). As relational human beings, micro aggressions are predominately harmful to women in work spaces and classroom environments (Robinson-Wood et al., 2015).
Another participant shared about self-doubt, “a challenge would be myself, you know? Like can you really do this? You know? What about your kids, what about this, what about that?” (PA). The factors of self-selection found in this study are consistent with previous studies. Barsh and Yee (2011) posits, of all the forces that hold women back none are as powerful as entrenched beliefs. They found that many women hold limiting beliefs that stand in their own way – such as waiting to fill in more skills or just waiting to be asked. Although the participants in this current study experienced negative aspects of their leadership trajectory, each one persevered and succeeded in obtaining an executive position.

**Perception.** These African American women executives in nonprofits expressed there is an implicit perception of what a leader can look like. It was noted by 100% of the respondents that perception is important; it was identified as a challenge, and as a Black woman one must be careful. Here is how one participant expressed perception as a challenge:

The perception of people of color in general, and Black women and Black men is such that you're forced present yourself in a way that doesn't threaten the people that you're confronting or engaging. The second barrier is your gender. you find that people connect to, promote, support, encourage people who look like them when they look in the mirror. So, you come to understand that and find ways around that. (PD)

The dynamics of the perception of leadership is embedded into society’s fabric. The examination of leadership traits of influential people and organizational executives was traditionally focused on a homogeneous group, White males. Long accepted
theories primarily focused on the dominant culture of White male hierarchal model of
control and competitive behavior (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Loden, 1985; Northouse, 2016;
Parker & Ogilvie, 1996). Only recently, in the last few decades, has there been an
increase of studies conducted on gender and leadership (Lennon, 2013; Morrison et al.,
1987; Waring, 2003). The findings point to a need for more research as it pertains to the
intersectionality of African American women in the field and the effects of implicit bias
in the workplace.

**Fiscal challenges.** These African American women executives in nonprofits
reported challenges specific to the fiscal solvency of nonprofit organizations. Six out of
seven participants discussed fiscal solvency as a challenge during their journey to
leadership. Many participants shared that resource development has always been an issue
in the nonprofit sector and that sustainability continues to be a concern. Here is how one
participant explained the fiscal culture of the social sector: “Resource development aspect
of being a leader in the social sector is huge. It's a challenge. It can be, frustrating,
depressing and not making sense” (PG). Sustainability for nonprofits has been an
important aspect of the field. Researchers have noted the shift of nonprofits to adopt a
business model for sustainability (Collins, 2005; Dart, 2004; Froelich, 1999; Weisbrod,
1998). There are implications for the need of financial resource allocation and the
management of resources for sustainability of the organizations. Funds for professional
development, specifically in finance, must be made as part of the overall budget.

Two out of the seven women revealed that compensation was a concern. One
participant described being paid significantly less than her White counterparts, in which
she had to self-advocate for an equitable salary. As it pertains to compensation, Black
women have higher education levels and are more likely to hold managerial positions, yet men earn more than Black women. In 2014, the National Coalition on Black Civic Engagement reported although Black women lead working, they face intensified levels of unequal pay and unemployment challenges, all while making 68 cents on the dollar to their White male counterparts. This study supports the findings in literature of the wage gap for Black women.

Researchers note that questionable behavior is less likely condoned or engaged in by women (Eckel & Grossman, 1998; Swamy et al., 2001). This study supports the existing literature on women and leadership. Two of interviewees shared experiences in which the money management of an organization seemed questionable and they made the decision to leave as a result.

**Research question 2:** What strategies facilitated the attainment of executive positions among African American women in social sector organizations? This question addressed approaches used by African American women in ascertaining a C-Suite position in a nonprofit. It focused on methods for success and provided insight into how the participants in the study navigated their way to the C-suite. Six strategies surfaced: (a) positive feedback, (b) academic advancement and professional expertise training, (c) connection to culture, (d) openness to opportunities, (e) mentorship and sponsorship, and (f) trailblazing.

**Positive feedback.** These African American women executives in nonprofits reported positive feedback from others was instrumental in their journey. All participants shared experiences of moral, social, or inspiring support from others. The participants explained how the support from others allowed them to accomplish goals, be encouraged
to do things they did not think they could do, and to help navigate through challenges experienced. Here is how one participant described her experience:

There were a lot of people around me who were encouraging me to grow more so than me encouraging myself. I've had people who just look out and kind of directed me, “You should check this out or you should try that.” (PA)

Social capital resources represent the quality of relationships with peers, subordinates, and superiors which enhance the likelihood of beneficial returns, such as career advancement and promotions, higher earnings or bonuses, along with better mental health and psychological support (Coleman, 1990; James, 2000; Lin, 2000). The review of the literature suggests that African American women rely on relationships to help succeed in business and academia, but little is known about the nonprofit sector (Davis, 2012; Jones & Osbourne-Lampkin, 2013). The findings in this study support that relationships can be utilized to help succeed in the nonprofit sector, as well.

**Professional development.** These African American women executives in nonprofits reported that academic advancement and professional development assisted in their success in becoming executive leaders. All participants communicated the importance of education in their successful attainment of an executive position. Four of the seven participants received a terminal degree as noted in Tables 4.1 and 4.2. All participants stated they were involved in continuous learning activities. The respondents also noted that professional development was almost always self-initiated. Nonprofits have a difficult time because of budget constraints investing in formal professional development programs and leadership capacity (Johnson, 2009; The Bridgespan Group, 2015; Tierney, 2006). Further research is recommended on the impact of finance training
and organizational sustainability in the social sector. The findings from this study support existing literature on human capital investment in the social sector.

**Connection to culture.** These African American women executives in nonprofits reported having a connection to culture as part of their blueprint to success. All seven participants referenced a connection to being Black women. Experiences mentioned included attending an historically Black college or university (HBCU), being a part of associations that are led by African Americans, and having a church family all emerged from the interviews. Acknowledgement of their identity as Black women was a source of strength. Participants shared how involvement in their community, church, and even their own experience as part of the group they now work with, led them to want to work with social justice issues as a career choice. This sense of culture was dangerous to express in the past, but now is being shared, acknowledged, and has informed their practice as executives.

Per Collins (2002), Black feminist thought encompasses three major key components. First is intersectionality which involves the interlocking types of oppression (race, gender, sexuality, and class) and the acknowledging that all areas affect one’s life simultaneously. Second comprised of embracing Afrocentrism and allowing one’s culture and experience to inform one’s practice. Finally, Collins (2002) includes self-actualization, which is realization of personal potential, seeking personal growth, and encountering peak experiences which fulfills one’s full potential. Interviewees recognized that there may be a struggle, but moved forward seeing the potential in the work that had to be done and what it could mean to others. Throughout the course of the interviews self-actualization was made evident through the stories of perseverance, self-
advocacy, and determination. An example that was demonstrated by various participants was the decision to leave an organization due to the intuition that the money management was questionable or having to present the case of inequity as it relates to their counterparts. The women who shared their stories of self-advocacy also happened to be the women with the most experience in the human service field. According to Collins, (2002):

C. Wright Mills identifies this holistic epistemology as the "sociological imagination" and identifies its task and its promise as a way of knowing that enables individuals to grasp the relations between history and biography within society. Using one's standpoint to engage the sociological imagination can empower the individual. (p. 289)

Although many experience negative feedback through self-doubt or the doubt of others, they continued the journey to leadership. The findings are supported by existing research. The findings also imply that connection to culture was a source of strength that was used to attain leadership positions.

**Open to opportunities.** These African American women executives in nonprofits reported being open to opportunities as part of their tools used towards leadership. Four out of the seven participants stated how opportunities presented themselves even when unsolicited. The participants in this study explained how undesired, unplanned, and unthought of career opportunities were presented in a variety of experiences. Although others did not want the position at hand, participants were flexible enough to see an opportunity to gain skills, utilize their skills to build the organization’s potential, and continue to make an impact.
Many researchers state that the navigation to executive positions for women have not been a straight climb to the top (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Ryan et al., 2007; Sellers, 2009). Successful women leaders have different approaches to leadership that can appear to be lateral, change quickly, and broaden their experience (Sellers, 2009). Although the routes are not direct, the changes satisfy the desired outcome when looked at across a span of time (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Ryan et al., 2007). This existing literature supports the emerged theme of unsolicited opportunities and an openness to take advantage of them. Findings suggest that aspiring leaders not hold back from taking opportunities and should always be open to them as they come. It is essential for African American women executives to have a vision and see potential in opportunities that present themselves.

Mentors. These African American women executives in nonprofits reported mentors and sponsors that were outside their racial and gender identities. All seven participants reported having a mentor and/or sponsor that connected them to an employment opportunity and provided support. When asked, participants reported a sponsor as someone who was outside of their race and gender identities. Narratives of formal and informal networks that were exclusive of people of color were noted. Four of the seven participants noted the importance of diversity in their network, as well. Diversity included ethnic/racial backgrounds, fields of interests, and even geographic variety.

The findings indicate aspiring leaders must actively recruit a diverse pool of mentors. This is advantageous for leadership growth. Lennon (2013) posits that “up to now, nonprofits have tended to draw their leaders from a relatively small circle of friends and acquaintances” (p. 32). Aspiring leaders must ensure they have an expansive circle
to assist in learning information that may expand their options in leadership. As previously mentioned, social capital resources represent the quality of relationships with peers, subordinates, and superiors which enhance the likelihood of beneficial returns, such as career advancement and promotions, higher earnings or bonuses, along with better mental health and psychological support (Coleman, 1990; James, 2000; Lin, 2000).

There is an added layer that should be addressed in leadership as well. Nonprofit leadership must be intentional about their recruitment practices in order to diversify and close the racial leadership gap. Thomas-Breitfeld and Kunreuther (2017) posit there are more similarities than differences in the background and preparation between Whites and people of color as it pertains to being qualified and having aspirations to lead in the nonprofit sector. They note that people of color are as ready as Whites to take on leadership roles, but they face unspoken and unconscious biases that prevent those with hiring power from fairly assessing, recognizing, and valuing their potential.

**Trailblazing.** These African American women executives in nonprofits reported experiences of trailblazing. Five of the seven participants shared narratives about being the first or part of the very few African American women in their positions, having the courage to implement a new concept at their agency, or pioneering at their organization because of their contributions, and in some cases, having to start from scratch, during their journey. Two participants were the first and second Black females to hold a position at an agency for which they have worked. One participant stated she was the first women to be appointed president of the organization. Participants were either chosen to start up an agency, satellite site, or founded a concept used for the first time at the organization. Black women have used many different strategies to create a career
pathway. Greenwald (1990) discussed how Black women used tight labor markets (during war times) to move to more flexible jobs. Shortages have allowed for opportunities for women and Black women proved themselves in such a way that when the shortage was over, they were kept on permanently or promoted.

The implications from the collected data demonstrate that participants identified nearly double the amount of strategies than the number of challenges experienced. Three out of the four challenges discussed were external and from an institutional standpoint. Those factors include (a) perception of leadership, (b) fiscal solvency, (c) and compensation. As it pertains to strategies, three out of the six strategies expressed by participants were based on an external and institutional standpoint. Those factors include (a) positive feedback, (b) mentoring and sponsorship, and (c) opportunity. When one examines trailblazing, it can be considered an institutional challenge considering the history of an organization (i.e. first female CEO in its 80-year history). A juxtaposition of the aforementioned assists in revealing how institutions must do more to ensure equitable representation to address the nonprofit racial leadership gap.

**Limitations**

This study acknowledged the need for further research on the challenges experienced and strategies used by African American women in nonprofit executive leadership positions. Despite the efforts to minimize the limitations some were still present.

**Generalizability.** The findings of this study should be viewed with caution. Small population sizes are commonly used for phenomenological studies (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin., 2009) The data can only speak to the participants that agreed to be a
part of the study. While data and stories provide insight, the accounts collected are only representative of the seven participants within the study, and should not be generalized to include all African American women in executive nonprofit positions.

**Sample size.** Having a sample size of seven participants limited the range of data that could be collected and thus limited the identification of more strategies that might be implemented. Having more participants would increase the knowledge base in sharing successful leadership tools. Having a greater number of participants would have expanded the amount of data gathered related to the challenges and strategies of African American female nonprofit executives.

**Geographic.** This study investigated the obstacles and strategies of African American women executive leaders in the New York metropolitan area. Thus, this study was limited in geographic scope. There may be differences in the types of barriers and strategies used in other geographic locations. As a result, the findings may not be transferrable to other African American women executive leaders of nonprofits in the United States and even globally.

**Recommendations**

The qualitative data gathered through this study leads to recommendations for current nonprofit institution leadership and aspiring nonprofit executives. The findings of the study also suggest the need for future research beyond this scope. A variety of recommendations are made within this section for further examination of this topic.

These African American women nonprofit executives highlighted the following challenges: (a) negative feedback, (b) perception of leadership, (c) fiscal solvency, and (d) compensation. The strategies emphasized by participants included: (a) positive
feedback, (b) academic advancement and professional expertise training, (c) connection to culture, (d) opportunity, (e) mentoring and sponsorship, and (f) trailblazing. The following recommendations will assist in minimizing the challenges and maximizing strategies for African American women who are aspiring executives. These suggestions will also speak to the leadership in the social sector to act as a catalyst for change.

**Recommendation 1: philanthropic organizations and funders must be a part of the solution.** Funders of the very important work that is done in the sector must become allies to close the racial and gender leadership gap in the nonprofit sector. Much like the federal government has addressed women and minority owned businesses in their contracts to combat the underrepresentation of minorities for governmental grants, philanthropic organizations should take heed. Funders of the social sector should consider incentivizing moving toward race and gender equity in leadership. Organizations will then be inclined to intentionally move forward in reevaluating their hiring practices.

**Recommendation 2: training on race equity, implicit bias, and recruitment practice for boards of nonprofits.** Acknowledgement of systematic barriers for African American women by those able to hire must be addressed to change the narrative. Once awareness is a part of the foundation in hiring practices, efforts can be made to ensure hidden prejudices are minimized. There are race-conscience human resource tools that can be utilized.

**Recommendation 3: creating systems of support for African American women executives of nonprofit organizations.** Those seeking to be executive leaders must have a system of support. This support should include the same trainings and
opportunities for learning along with their White counterparts. This allows for an increase and diversified network. However, African American women should also have their own acquaintances, with whom they can connect as it pertains to identifying as an African American, and as a woman. This can be a source of strength, peer advisement, and a sharing of experiences that can lead to a pathway to advancement.

**Recommendation 4: creating indicators for progress toward performance measures in the social sector’s pursuit towards racial and gender leadership equity.**

In order to ensure continuous improvement in the underrepresentation of African American women in nonprofit executive leadership, data should be collected on efforts made by organizations. Data driven decision making allows for the collection and analysis of information to assess impact and find new solutions to the challenges of disbanding barriers.

**Recommendation 5: investment by organizations in human capital and leadership capacity building within their organizations, which includes financial and resource allocation training.** Professional development was noted as an essential part of navigating the leadership labyrinth for these participants. Agency sustainability and understanding finance development is essential for all executives. However, it has been noted that people of color and women feel they are less likely than their White counterparts, to identify as good fundraisers (Thomas-Breitfeld & Kunreuther, 2017).

African American women identified that they self-initiated these opportunities and this burden can be an added challenge as it pertains to funding their own learning opportunities that are transferrable to the organization. This burden should be removed from the individual and organizations should invest in the opportunity of making their
leaders the best they can be. Hall (2008) shares that CEOs spend 10% of their time developing leaders, while those in top companies are spending more than 25% of their time developing leaders. He also notes that within a 3-year period those organizations that invested in developing their staff experienced a 22% increase in returns for the organizations studied. For nonprofits, this can mean an increase in services provided, movement toward goal achievement, and greater impact for communities served.

Conclusion

This study focused on understanding the blueprint for success from African American women who obtained executive positions in the social sector. Although there were hardships encountered, these women overcame them using strategies shared in this phenomenological study. Their success stories were captured through semi-structured interviews. The African American women in this study were selected because they self-identified as a Black female and their agency had an operating budget at or above $1 million. Two research questions were employed to gather their lived experiences.

1. What, if any, challenges are faced by African American women face in obtaining senior level management positions of nonprofit agencies?

2. What strategies facilitated the attainment of executive positions among African American women in social sector organizations?

The participants included seven African American women who were executives at nonprofits located in the New York metropolitan area. As noted in the participant profiles, they came from different fields prior to nonprofit leadership, ranged in age, and varied in educational backgrounds. The results of this study concur with previous research on challenges of African Americans, women in leadership, and the concrete
ceiling experienced by African American women (Davis & Maldonado, 2015; Eagly & Carli, 2007; Key et al., 2012)

Besides concurring with existing literature, the results magnified the need for organization leaders to acknowledge and act to disband the systematic and institutionalized barriers to racial and gender equity in nonprofit leadership. The findings from this study expound, validate, and corroborate the discoveries of Thomas-Breitfield and Kunreuther (2017) on the nonprofit racial leadership gap. The aforementioned study found few differences in the qualifications of people of color and their White counterparts; people of color aspire more to be nonprofit leaders, but governing nonprofit organizations are not finding or hiring people of color. The study suggests a system change which includes connecting culture, practices, and policies that are aligned with values of equity, diversity, and inclusion with results that should be measured.

The population of women studied reflected on the challenges and major contributors to their success. The answers shared by participants were from a personal and workspace standpoint. The identified themes about the challenges these women face shed light on the lack of psychological support and personal struggles experienced by participants. There were many more strategies identified by the participants as possible solutions to the issues as compared to the amount of obstacles they faced. Self-disclosure was extremely important in this process.

We must be mindful that these narratives exist and must acknowledge the need to continue to move towards an equitable outcome. While it is important to understand the experiences of the African American women executives who participated in this research, it is imperative to note that nonprofit organizations and social justice conduits with
missions to support equity must implement policies and produce a culture that addresses the problem and monitors its effectiveness to solve it.
References


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Appendix A

Theoretical Framework

Career Pathways of African American Women

- Focus on the importance of relationships that enhance beneficial returns
- Focus is on the world of work

- Empowerment of Black Women
- Focus on the oppression of race and gender

- Considers race, gender and social class
- Focuses on the understanding of the complexities of multiple identities in a dominant culture

- Focuses on the importance of developing human resources within an organization
- Considers organizational culture benefits

- Intersectionality
- Black Feminist Thought
- Human Capital
- Social Capital
Appendix B

Prescreening Questionnaire

1. Your current Title: __________________________
   - # of years in current position
     - 0-1 Yr
     - 1-3 Yrs.
     - 3-5 Yrs.
     - 5-10 Yrs.
     - Over 10 Yrs.
   - Number of years at current agency
     - 0-1 Yr
     - 1-3 Yrs.
     - 3-5 Yrs.
     - 5-10 Yrs.
     - Over 10 Yrs.

2. Gender
   - Male or Female

3. Which race/ethnicity do you identify as:
   - Black/African American

4. Education Level
   - High School Diploma or Equivalent
   - Undergraduate Degree
   - Master’s level
   - Doctorate level
   - Other Credential

5. Approximate budget of organization
   - $250,000 - or less
   - $250,000 - $500,000
   - $500,000 - $1 million
   - $1 million - $2.5 million
   - $2.5 million - $5 million
   - $5 million - $10 million
   - $10 million - $25 million
   - $25 million - $50 million
   - Greater than $50 million

6. Are you willing to be interviewed about your experience as an executive leader?
   - Yes or No

7. Please provide the best telephone number and e-mail address to reach you if selected for the interview process in the space provided below.
Appendix C

Letter of Introduction

My name is Zenya Alvarez-Cleveland and I am a doctoral student (Ed. D. in Executive Leadership) at St. John Fisher College (Cohort 7, Iona College, NY Campus). My dissertation is on the challenges faced and strategies used by African American women executives of nonprofit organizations.

My interest in this topic is based on my life-long community service involvement, including 13 years as a licensed social worker in New York and my professional experience in nonprofit management. I am currently employed in the human service field as a Director of Family and Community Engagement as well as a staff training coordinator for a federally funded early childhood education program located in Rockland County, NY.

I am writing to request that you participate in this study by completing the attached “Informed Consent to Participate in Research” signifying your rights as well as willingness to participate and completing the interview. The interview should require no more than one hour of your time to complete.

This study has been reviewed and approved by the St. John Fisher College Institutional Review Board (IRB). Once the dissertation has been successfully defended and approved by St. John Fisher College I will be willing to provide a copy of my findings to any interested study participant.

I would like to thank you in advance for considering my request and I am hopeful that you will participate in this study so that your feelings on this important topic as individuals and as social justice change agents can be known. If you have further questions regarding this study, please feel free to contact me at (917) 673-6482 or by e-mail at zra08741@sjfc.edu.

Very truly yours,

Zenity Cleveland
Doctoral Candidate
Appendix D

Appendix C

St. John Fisher College
Informed Consent to Participate in Research


Researcher: Zenya Cleveland

Dissertation Chair: Dr. Janice Kelly (917) 969-3226

Committee Member: Dr. William (Bill) Leipold (973) 699-6439

Introduction:

You are being asked to participate in a research study being conducted by Zenya Cleveland for a doctoral dissertation under the supervision of Dr. Janice Kelly of the Ed. D. in Executive Leadership Program at St. John Fisher College. You are asked to participate because you are an executive leader of a human service agency located in the New York Metropolitan area. In this study, participants receive an internet based questionnaire designed to obtain information on their interest to participate. Participants will be asked to voluntarily participate in a follow-up face to face semi structured interview that will take approximately an hour. Participants may agree to only participate in the questionnaire. It is hoped that African American women in executive positions of human service agencies located in the New York Metropolitan area will be willing to share their views relating to the questionnaire and interview.

Please read the form carefully and ask any questions that you may have before deciding whether to participate in the study.

Purpose of the Study:

This study will examine the what obstacles, if any are faced and the strategies used by African American women executive positions of social sector organization. The study will inform the public, current and aspiring organizational leaders about the concerns future administrators may have moving up the organizational ladder and ways that may impact leadership development in the nonprofit field for African American women.

Study Procedures:

Your participation in this study is strictly voluntary. If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to complete an interview that will be digitally recorded and take no more than an hour. The identifying data from these interviews will be held for three years and then destroyed.
Risks and Benefits:

The researcher will protect the confidentiality/privacy of all research data. There is minimal risk involved in participating in this research. You may discontinue your participation for any reason during your participation in this research study. You may refuse to answer any question in this research study.

Confidentiality/Privacy:

All information collected in this study will remain confidential. To maintain the utmost confidentiality of the participants in this study, no data will be released identifying participants or their agencies. All research will be conducted with the highest ethical standards for confidentiality. The researcher will maintain any records associated with this study in a locked cabinet for a period of three years following the completion of research and then the records will be destroyed.

Your rights:

As a research participant, you have the right to:

1. Have the purpose of the study, and the expected risks and benefits fully explained to you before you choose to participate.
2. Withdraw from participation at any time without penalty.
3. Refuse to answer a particular question without penalty.
4. Be informed of appropriate alternative procedures or courses of treatment, if any, that might be advantageous to you.
5. Be informed of the results of the study.

If you have further questions regarding this study, please contact the researcher, Zenya Cleveland at 917-673-6482 or by e-mail at zcn08741@sjfc.edu.

This study has been reviewed and approved by the St. John Fisher College Institutional Review Board (IRB). If you experience any discomfort due to your participation in this study, the appropriate resources will be provided to you by the researcher. Concerns or complaints about this study may also be addressed to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at St. John Fisher College, 3690 East Avenue, Rochester, New York 14618, and (585) 385-8000 or by e-mail at irb@sjfc.edu.

Participant's Signature: ___________________________ Date: ___________________________

Researcher's Signature: ___________________________ Date: ___________________________
Appendix E

Demographic Questionnaire

Age Range
- 1) 25 –35;
- 2) 36-45;
- 3) 46- 55;
- 4) 56- 65;
- 5) 66 +

Number of Years of Experience in Human/Social Services/Nonprofit
- 0-1 Yrs.
- 1-3 Yrs.
- 3-5 Yrs.
- 5-10 Yrs.
- 11 - 15 Yrs.
- If over 16 years please submit #________

What number of years have you been in an executive position at any human service organization?
- 0-1 Yr
- 1-3 Yrs.
- 3-5 Yrs.
- 5-10 Yrs.
- 11 - 15 Yrs.
- If over 16 years please submit #________

Counting all locations where your employer operates, what is the total number of persons who work there?
- 1
- 2-9
- 10-24
- 25-99
- 100-499
- 500-999
- 1000-4,999
- 5,000+
- Over 200,000
## Appendix F

Theory Based Interview Protocol Questions Mapped to Research Question

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Research Questions</th>
<th>Interview Questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>What are the challenges, if any, that African American women face in obtaining senior level management positions of nonprofit agencies?</td>
<td>What, if any, barriers did you experience while obtaining an executive leadership positions?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>What strategies facilitated the attainment of top level positions among African American women to reach executive positions in social sector organizations?</td>
<td>Can you recall any mentorship or sponsorship experience you may have had within your career pathway?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Can you describe any leadership development or training that you have participated in?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>How, if at all, did engagement with a professional organization assist with your climb to a senior executive position?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>What advice would you give one aspiring to a senior executive position?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
