African American Female Executive Leaders: Identifying and Implementing Strategies to Ensure Health, Wellness, and Well-Being

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African American Female Executive Leaders: Identifying and Implementing Strategies to Ensure Health, Wellness, and Well-Being

Abstract
The purpose of this qualitative, interpretative phenomenological study was to explore the phenomenon of Black female executives holding positions of leadership who are isolated by race as the only, or one of the few, persons of color in a predominantly White organization. This was accomplished by highlighting the perceptions of the lived experiences of nine Black female executives throughout the Central New York State region, working in healthcare, education, government, nonprofit, and private sectors. These women report navigating microaggressions, isolation, invisibility, and hypervisibility—all while striving to achieve success in their leadership role, prioritize personal pursuits, and manage caregiver responsibilities. As a result, their overall wellbeing is often compromised. Considering the challenges of simply being both Black and female, as highlighted in the reviewed literature and derived from the data collection process, it is apparent that self-care should be prioritized for every individual, regardless of their job title or industry. The findings provide a resiliency strategy for professional Black women who aspire to enter leadership roles. Organizations and institutions can utilize the results as a roadmap to foster a culture of support and engagement with diverse leaders by dismantling systems and organizational structures that create hierarchies, provide mentorship and coaching, create safe spaces, and incorporate culturally inclusive activities.

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African American Female Executive Leaders: Identifying and Implementing Strategies
to Ensure Health, Wellness, and Well-Being

By

Brandiss T. Pearson

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

Supervised by
Dr. Linda Hickmon Evans

Committee Member
Dr. Loretta Quigley

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

August 2020
Dedication

First and foremost, I thank God for the grace and mercy bestowed upon me throughout my life, but especially during this doctoral program.

The cohort. To Cohort 6 (Confidimus Processus 6), thank you for pushing me beyond my comfort zone and helping me find my voice as a leader. T2 – I couldn’t have done this without you!

Sister-friends. To my beautiful, amazing, marvelous sisters (#BAMS) – thank you for the gift of friendship and sisterhood. I am eternally grateful to each of you. To Sharon Shaw, thank you for always showing up for me. Can’t wait for our next adventure. To Jalea’s mommy, my person, my soul-sister. Blood could not make us any closer. I am so proud of you. I love you, Sissy-bug. To Yani, 34 years and counting! Not too many people can say that. We have literally grown up together. I am so blessed to call you my best friend and thank you for the gift of my God-children.

Family. To my brothers, Seth (Chad) and Quintin. You both are truly my built-in best friends. Thank you for loving me. Being the middle child and the only girl isn’t so bad, I guess.

To my parents, Sharron and Albert. I appreciate you both beyond measure. Thank you for loving me unconditionally, even through those tough teenage years, when I was really hard to love. I am blessed to have you as my parents. Dad, thanks for always listening. I am blessed to have you as my Daddy. Mommy, you are my real-life superhero. Thank you for the permission to be anything I wanted to be. Thank you for
never giving up on me. Thank you for always rooting for me. How can I fail when you refused to?

To my extended family and friends, you all have been such a source of love and encouragement. Thank you for your support. Ronnie, thank you for your continued friendship, support, and being a great co-parent.

To my sons, Shaun (the producer) and Brandon (the entertainer). God was really flexing his muscles when he chose me to be your mom. You guys give my life meaning and purpose. I am forever grateful for the gift of your love, patience, sacrifice, and support. I hope that I have made you proud. In the words of Maya Angelou “I do my best because I am counting on you, counting on me.”

My village. To my hometown, Syracuse, NY. Thank you for making me who I am and allowing me to serve and grow. To Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Incorporated, thank you for teaching me to prioritize sisterhood, scholarship, and service to all mankind. To my mentees, thank you for trusting me. Remember these words from The Alchemist by Paulo Coelho “when you want something, all the universe conspires to help you achieve it.”

To the faculty of St. John Fisher College, I am forever indebted to you for this amazing journey. Thank you for your dedication to my growth and development as a leader. To my committee member, Dr. Loretta Quigley, thank you for giving me chance after chance to grow in and outside of the classroom. To Dr. Linda Hickmon Evans, thank you for showing me who you knew I could be. I see “her” now.

To Harlem, thank you for changing my life. #FindHerKeepHer
Biographical Sketch

Brandiss T. Pearson is a board-certified family nurse practitioner, currently working as Director of Community Engagement at St. Joseph’s Health. Ms. Pearson earned a Bachelor of Science degree in social work from Syracuse University in 2008. She decided to pivot from social work and pursue nursing. Ms. Pearson attended St. Joseph’s College of Nursing and graduated with an Associate of Applied Science degree in spring 2011. Ms. Pearson earned a Post-Baccalaureate certificate in nursing from Le Moyne College in fall 2011. Ms. Pearson later attended SUNY Upstate Medical University earning a Master of Science degree, Family Nurse Practitioner track, with a minor in nursing education in 2017.

Ms. Pearson completed the Health Foundation of Central and Western New York’s 2019 Healthcare Leadership Fellows program, which focuses on addressing disparities for the young and elderly impacted by poverty in the community. Ms. Pearson is also a proud member of Alpha Kappa Alpha, Sorority, Incorporated.

Ms. Pearson enrolled in St. John Fisher College and began the Ed. D. Program in Executive in 2018 and completed her studies in 2020. Her research focused on strategies for well-being for Black women in executive leadership under the direction of Dr. Linda Hickmon Evans and Dr. Loretta Quigley.
Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative, interpretative phenomenological study was to explore the phenomenon of Black female executives holding positions of leadership who are isolated by race as the only, or one of the few, persons of color in a predominantly White organization. This was accomplished by highlighting the perceptions of the lived experiences of nine Black female executives throughout the Central New York State region, working in healthcare, education, government, nonprofit, and private sectors. These women report navigating microaggressions, isolation, invisibility, and hypervisibility—all while striving to achieve success in their leadership role, prioritize personal pursuits, and manage caregiver responsibilities. As a result, their overall well-being is often compromised. Considering the challenges of simply being both Black and female, as highlighted in the reviewed literature and derived from the data collection process, it is apparent that self-care should be prioritized for every individual, regardless of their job title or industry. The findings provide a resiliency strategy for professional Black women who aspire to enter leadership roles. Organizations and institutions can utilize the results as a roadmap to foster a culture of support and engagement with diverse leaders by dismantling systems and organizational structures that create hierarchies, provide mentorship and coaching, create safe spaces, and incorporate culturally inclusive activities.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

Women continue to lack representation in organizational leadership roles (Hispanic Media Sales, Inc., 2002); as a result, very little empirical evidence is available to document women in leadership (O’Neil, Hopkins, & Bilimoria, 2015). Research related to the experiences of African American females in executive leadership is limited, likely because it has been incorporated into feminist literature, inadvertently silencing the unique voices of Black women (Waring, 2003). For all women, leadership development and the ascension to corporate success continues to be an uphill battle because, according to Evans (2014) and Miller, Quealy, & Sanger-Katz (2018), there are fewer women in leadership than there are men named “John.”

African American women navigate the world with the duality of being both female and a member of a racially marginalized group. The intersection of gender and race have significant impacts on leadership development and overall health and wellness (Davis, 2016). Black feminist theory advances a framework that asserts that race and gender cannot be separated (Beal, 2008). Carli and Eagly (2001) and Combs (2003) agree that, in theory, overt discrimination based on race and/or gender is less acceptable in society; however, in practice, there continues to be evidence of its persistence. Further, the persistence of overt discrimination results in unsupportive work environments, lack of mentorship, and lack of access to informal networks to increase valuable human capital. Work is demanding, regardless of one’s gender or racial background, but exposure to bias
and discrimination is especially stressful for those who face racism and sexism every day (St. Jean & Feagin, 1998).

The purpose of this study was to explore the phenomenon of Black female executives holding positions of leadership who were isolated by race as the only, or one of the only, persons of color in a predominantly White organization. The participants were selected because they hold leadership roles in organizations where they are the only woman of color, or one of the few. In alignment with Solomon (2019), the terms *Black* and *African American* were respectfully used interchangeably throughout this study. In a report brief on addressing systemic racism in the United States, the Center for American Progress made sure to capitalize Black to reflect a group of people and to be consistent with the capitalization of African American (Solomon, 2019).

For the purpose of this study, health, wellness, and well-being were explored separately for distinctiveness of their definitions and, later, to be referenced in a manner that provides a more interconnected, holistic view. Health is defined as the ability of the body to adapt to new threats and infirmities—not simply the absence of illness—instead a state of overall well-being (Felman, 2017; World Health Organization, 1948).

Well-being and wellness often are used interchangeably, however, in this study a distinction was drawn. The 2019 Gallup Healthways Well-Being Index Report positions well-being as an overall perception of an individual when related to their life and experiences, referencing five interconnected elements. Those five elements include the following:

- Purpose – liking what one does each day and being motivated to achieve personal goals;
Social – having supportive relationships and love in your life;

Financial – managing one’s economic life to reduce stress and increase security;

Community – liking where one lives, feeling safe, and having pride in one’s community; and

Physical – having good health and enough energy to get things done every day (Sharecare, 2020).

The Global Wellness Institute ([GWI], n.d.) defines wellness as a dynamic individual pursuit and awareness of activities, choices, and lifestyles that lead to a holistic state of health. GWI further acknowledges that the physical, social, and cultural environment of an individual significantly affects their wellness.

The focus on health and wellness in the workplace has garnered national attention as evidenced by the National Institutes of Health (NIH) releasing, for their employees, a Workplace Wellness Policy (WWP) in July 2017. The Workplace Wellness Program is aligned with the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) National Healthy People initiatives, which compiled three decades of science-based research highlighting objectives for improving the health of all Americans. One of the main goals of Healthy People is for Americans to live longer lives free from preventable disease and premature death (www.healthypeople.gov). High stress can lead to the development and persistence of preventable chronic disease and premature death (Schmidt, 2016). Strategies that promote well-being are thought to reduce the negative, preventable health-related impacts of stress (Schneiderman, Ironson, & Siegel, 2005).
Cohen et al. (1998) defined stress as the taxing demands on an organism that exceed the organism’s adaptive capacity, leading to biological and psychological changes that may put the organism at risk for disease. The stressors specifically impacting Black women in racially isolated leadership positions are arguably absent from the literature. Crenshaw (1989) argued that Black women have been “theoretically erased” (p. 139). She posited that the experiences of Black women could not simply be grafted into existing narratives about the feminist experience or the Black experience because both of those narratives only speak to a single identity and not to the dual status of Black women. Crenshaw (1989) also posited that if Black women cannot categorically assert that discrimination is based solely on their race or their gender, they are not afforded the same support and resources as their counterparts whose marginalized status is based on one identity. Instead, they are to lie in wait until they can be absorbed into a more encompassing, protected classification of race or sex (Crenshaw, 1989).

Enduring negative stereotypes and assumptions toward Black people, imposed by those in positions of privilege and power, are well-documented in the annals of American history (Boskin, 1988). Throughout America’s history, portrayals of Black women were narrowed to three demeaning and stereotypical categories: oversexualized, hostile, or servant-types (West, 1995), to include:

- **Jezebels** depicted in images of scantily clad, promiscuous Black women, with its genesis derived from the Bible. She signified an immoral or deceitful woman.
- **Sapphire** represented the hostile Black woman who was emasculating; a woman with harsh words, often instigating and engaging in a squabble.
Sapphire was a character from the 1950s show, *Amos ‘n’ Andy* (White, 1999; West, 1995).

- Mammy’s image was that of the domesticated, nurturing, mother-like servant. This woman was the socially imposed, acceptable image of the Black woman by those in power (Jewell, 2012). Almost always branded as an obese, dark-skinned, asexual, older woman, well known for donning a headscarf and apron, the Mammy image continues to persist as representative of many poor Black women (West, 1995).

Jewell (2012) said that race, gender, and class are the primary determinants of one’s position on the social hierarchy of discrimination, with Black women positioned at the lowest level. The psychosocial burdens of navigating negative stereotypes, marginalization, and lack of a critical mass in the work environment can unearth deep-rooted psychological issues, which can manifest as anger, anxiety, depression, and can influence health outcomes (Henry, Butler, & West, 2011). Defined by Fredette and Sessler Bernstein (2019), critical mass occurs when, in a given group, there is a sufficient number of members from a particular group such that an individual feels comfortable participating in conversations and that others see them as an individual rather than as a spokesperson for their race. Shorter-Gooden (2004) postulated that Black women contend with sexism from Black men, but they also contend with racism, sexism, and classism from White men and women. The oppression experienced is so great that Black women are essentially forced into creating safe havens from hostile work environments that inhibit their personal and professional development and well-being (Neal-Barnett et al., 2011). An example of a safe haven for Black women would be a sister circle. Sister
circles are a subset of women embedded within a group or organization who share a common interest or concern (Neal-Barnett et al., 2011).

This study is significant because the racial composition of the US and global populations are changing (Perez & Hirschman, 2009). It is projected that there will be more Black women in leadership by 2030 (Toossi, 2002), and diversity in the workforce is expected to increase over the next decade (2020 to 2030) (Buckley & Bachman, 2017). Therefore, guidance is needed to develop best practices for engaging a diverse workforce and supporting diverse leadership.

**Problem Statement**

Schwanke (2013) asserted that women are underrepresented in areas of governance, directorship, and executive leadership. The U.S. Census Bureau reported, in 2018, that women made up a majority of the U.S. population at 50.8% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018). Although women have made great strides in education and career advancement, making up 57% and 59% of undergraduate and graduate degrees, respectively and 52% of reported mid-level leadership positions (Corbett & Hill, 2015) they continue to trail behind men in the attainment of executive-level leadership positions (Hispanic Media Sales, Inc., 2002). In 2018, only one of the top 10 nonprofit organizations in the United States was led by a female CEO, with zero Black women as CEO (Barrett, 2019). Statistics from Catalyst (2019) show that women made up 5% of all CEO-level positions in S&P 500 companies (Figure 1.1).
Fortune 500 company leadership in 2019 comprised only 5% female CEOs, and zero women serving as CEO for any Fortune 500 health care company (Zarya, 2018). The statistics highlight that the higher an individual ascends the corporate ladder, the fewer the number of women.

According to Hamilton-Mason, Hall, and Everette (2009) and Byrd and Stanley (2009), barriers to career ascension for African American women into governance and leadership roles within predominantly White organizations may be linked to bias and discrimination related to race, gender, and social class. The lack of power and status potentiate those barriers for African American females who are otherwise educated and competent (Linehan, 2001).

Taylor (2010) identified inclusion and job support as integral to career development in the transition to executive leadership positions and overall well-being. Mentorship, inclusion, and the perception of a supportive work environment lend themselves to representations of social capital, a resource identified as lacking for African American female executives (Cottrill, Lopez, & Hoffman, 2014; Hague & Okpala, 2017) and therefore constitute barriers in the workplace.
Mentorship, according to Rasheem, Alleman, Mushonga, Anderson, and Vakalahi, (2018) is a significant contributor to success for executive leaders. Mentorship is defined as “a dynamic, reciprocal relationship in a work environment between an advanced-career incumbent (mentor) and a beginner (mentee) aimed at promoting the career development of both (Chopra, Edelson, & Saint, 2016, p. 1453)”. Murrell, Blake-Beard, Porter, and Perkins-Williamson (2008) emphasized the scarcity of available culturally competent mentors in an organization or discipline as an additional barrier for an increasingly diverse workforce.

African American female executives who seek culturally competent mentors are sometimes required to look outside their rank, city, job function, or organization (Murrell et al., 2008). Culturally competent mentors possess a set of skills that allows them to increase their understanding and appreciation of cultural differences and similarities within, among, and between groups (Nunez, 2000). Beckwith, Carter, and Peters (2016) asserted that African American female executives must work harder than their counterparts, and they are often excluded from informal social networks. Feelings of isolation are formed by being placed in positions where the African American female is the only one of that race and gender in their organization, also known as tokenism. As a result of that isolation, or token status, an African American female may establish a posture of dissemblance by abstaining from full disclosure of her true self in the workplace (Hine, 1989).

Promoting a supportive work environment can be advanced by fostering an inclusive setting led by an authentic leader. Authentic leadership is described by Cottrill et al. (2014) as an antecedent of inclusion, which lends itself to honest and open
relationships with members of a team. An authentic leader is aware of his/her own strengths, weaknesses, and values. The authentic leader uses that knowledge of self to guide interactions with others, while keeping organizational performance at the forefront (Cottrill et al., 2014). When subordinates feel supported by an authentic leader, their productivity and retention tend to remain sustainably high (Walumbwa, Avolio, Gardner, Wernsing, & Peterson, 2008). Dickens, Womack, and Dimes (2019) presented findings that suggest Black women are most effective when they are able to engage with authentic leaders in their work environment. A leader modeling authenticity creates opportunities for Black women to be authentic in their interactions and engagement. Conversely, Ngunjiri and Hernandez (2017) suggested that in the absence of authentic leadership, counterproductive strategies may impact productivity and leadership development, such as creating a culture of dissemblance. Dissemblance is the act of hiding something such as the truth or your real intentions (“Dissemblance,” n.d.).

Hine (1989) provided an example wherein Black women, migrating to the North in the late 1930s, created a culture of dissemblance. By appearing to offer full disclosure and openness, but maintaining a level of secrecy, Black women ultimately engaged in a self-imposed sense of invisibility, which may have manifested as distrust or modesty to the unknowing counterparts. Conversely, hypervisibility and feelings of overexposure associated with occupying a racially isolated leadership position create a burden for Black women to shift their behaviors and appearance to assimilate, possibly stifling their ability to develop as leaders (Combs, 2003; Dickens et al., 2019).

Invisibility and hypervisibility are not phenomena exclusive to Black women. Fielding-Singh, Magliozzi, and Ballakrishnen (2018) described intentional invisibility as
a device women employ to avoid conflict or backlash, to feel authentic at work, and to balance professional and personal demands in organizations where senior-level leadership is vastly male. Hypervisibility is appropriately included in discussions relating to identity-based treatment of marginalized groups within an organization. Buchanan and Settles (2018) explained that being hyper-visible as a member of a marginalized group within an organization leads to an individual’s personal identity becoming invisible, as the individual is only seen in terms of their marginalized status. In both cases, individuals may then be motivated to shift their level of visibility to regain control and to mitigate potential harm.

Identity shifting is the conscious or unconscious process of shifting one’s language, and/or cultural behaviors to accommodate differences in class, gender, and race (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003, p. 154). The mental, emotional, and physical consequences of identity shifting to mitigate the ever-present and reductive stereotypes of Jezebel, Sapphire, and Mammy in the workplace is cause for concern because negative health outcomes associated with increased stressors may develop and/or persist (Assari, 2018). Some Black women adopt and shift to ascribe to the strong Black woman (SBW) persona of displaying untiring strength and nurturing of others, while neglecting to engage in proper self-care (Jones & Pritchett-Johnson, 2018). Sojourner Truth and Harriet Tubman have historically been associated with the SBW persona (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2007; Harris-Lacewell, 2001).

Watson and Hunter (2016) explored the implications of ascribing to the SBW schema. They explained that the SBW schema is associated with a defined set of
characteristics described by the authors as *tensions*. These tensions require the strong SBW to:

1. Be psychologically durable without engaging in behaviors that preserve psychological durability. The SBW feels obligated to abstain from expressing emotions or refrain from seeking counseling, instead they are expected to appear unaffected by life’s challenges for fear of being deemed unstable or unable to handle their responsibilities.

2. Be equal while being oppressed. The SBW navigates being recognized as an equal and contributing member of society versus being seen as a hypocrite who has distanced herself from the struggle often associated with being Black and female.

3. Be feminine yet reject traditional feminine norms. The SBW feels forced to display dependency to attract a mate, while being strong and independent, denying the need for support from others (Watson & Hunter, 2016, p. 434).

The authors explained that those who ascribe to the SBW schema are faced with unfavorable consequences of poor health outcomes relating to poor emotional well-being and the more favorable attribute of self-efficacy (Watson & Hunter, 2017). Ascribing to the SBW persona was established as a way to show strength in the face of adversity and to counteract the negative societal characterizations of African American women as immoral, hostile, promiscuous, and emasculating to their male counterparts. However, the unfavorable consequences of the persona include the development of anxiety, depression, obesity-related to emotional eating, smoking, dysfunctional sleep patterns,
not prioritizing self-care, and the development of chronic diseases as a direct result of stress (Woods-Giscombe, 2010).

Managing the interconnected impact of race and gender is a central theme in Black women’s daily life experiences. According to Brown and Keith (2003) the triangulation of race, gender, and socioeconomic status impacts the overall well-being of African American women. However, the stressors and effects of said stressors, specifically that impact Black women in racially isolated leadership positions, are arguably absent from the literature (Waring, 2003).

This study explored the phenomenon of African American female executives holding positions of leadership, isolated by race, by highlighting their perceptions of their lived experiences relating to their work environment and strategies they employed to ensure their overall well-being while navigating an executive leadership role.

**Theoretical Rationale**

This study was guided by transition theory, which was introduced by Schlossberg in 1984, to offer guidance to counselors of adult learners as they supported the learners through their transition back into an academic setting. Schlossberg (1987) was fascinated with transitions and how individuals navigate change. She categorized different types of transitions as anticipated, unanticipated, or nonevents in an individual’s life that alter relationships, routines, and assumptions (Schlossberg, 1987). An anticipated event might include college graduation, marriage, or the birth of a child. Unanticipated events might include sudden illness or disability, being a victim of a crime, the sudden death of a loved one, or a global pandemic. Nonevents could include never marrying or never having children (Schlossberg, 1987).
Schlossberg’s (1984) transition theory provided a systematic framework for understanding individuals in transition and providing a roadmap for successfully navigating events or nonevents that impact the health and wellness of African American female leaders working as the only, or one of the only, persons of color in a leadership role. This theory captures the Black female executive leadership trajectory of ascending the leadership ladder and the often-inherent challenges. Schlossberg (1984) posited that, although transitions and individuals are unique, the structure for understanding each transition is consistent. Schlossberg’s (1984) transition theory was deemed appropriate because it can be applied to African American female leaders who are transitioning into a new leadership role, those navigating an event or nonevent as an established leader, or transitioning out of a job, whether the transition is voluntary or involuntary. Moreover, the theory speaks to the mechanisms that ensure wholeness as one negotiates systems and/or relationships.

Schlossberg (1984) presented the transition model in three major parts: (a) approaching transitions, (b) taking stock of coping resources, and (c) taking charge. Approaching a transition in life is the first part of the process that identifies the nature of the transition (anticipated or unanticipated), the degree to which it will impact the individual’s life, and the most effective approach to dealing with the transition. The second part, taking stock of coping resources, requires employing the 4-S system to identify the potential resources available to the individual in transition. The 4-S system refers to four fundamental coping factors, namely: situation, self, support, and strategies. The final part of the transition process is taking charge. In this phase of the process, the individual engages new strategies to manage the transition (Schlossberg, 1984).
Using transition theory as a framework, the participants in this study were asked to reflect upon and describe the types of transitions they endured and encountered in their work environment (anticipated, unanticipated, or nonevent), the degree to which the transition altered their lives, where they were in a given transition, and the resources and strategies that ensured their health, wellness, and well-being during their transitions in alignment with the 4-S system.

The first factor of the 4-S system is self. This factor refers to the strengths and weaknesses of the individual to influence a transition. The second factor, situation, explores what type of transition is occurring. Support, the third factor, refers to the systems and/or people available to help an individual navigate transition(s). Strategy is the final factor. This factor requires an individual to assess the transition at hand and enlist and/or deploy resources to develop a coping strategy (Pellegrino & Hogan, 2015).

The factors included in the 4-S system provide a framework for individuals engaging in a transition process. This study incorporated each of the four components of Schlossberg’s (1984) transition theory to explore the strategies African American female executive leaders employed to ensure their health, wellness, and well-being. Exploring the lived experiences of African American women working in racially isolated leadership positions, utilizing the 4-S system, provided a viable framework for influencing the strategies related to health, wellness, and well-being for the population under review.
Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this qualitative, interpretative phenomenological study was to explore the phenomenon of Black female executives holding positions of leadership who are isolated by race as the only, or one of the only, people of color in a predominantly White organization, by highlighting their perceptions of their lived experiences related to their work environment and strategies they employ to ensure their overall well-being while navigating an executive leadership role. The study took place in Central New York with Black women who served as executives in major industries (health, education, government, non-profit institutions, and the private sector). For this qualitative, interpretative phenomenological approach, nine participants were recruited for this study (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2012).

Research Questions

This study aimed to answer the following research questions, utilizing each factor from Schlossberg’s (1984) 4-S theory:

1. Self: What are the lived experiences of African American female executives in their existing work environments that relate to mentorship, support, and well-being?
2. Situation: What are the perceptions of African American female leaders on the dynamics that influence their health and wellness in their work environments?
3. Support: In what ways do African American female executives describe their support networks?
4. Strategies: What strategies do African American female executive leaders employ to ensure their well-being?
Significance of the Study

Black women working in positions who are isolated by race and/or gender may be able to help other executives from marginalized groups navigate transitions during their leadership development. It is the hope that others will utilize the identified strategies as a roadmap to combat disruptions to their health, wellness, and well-being. Employers may use the findings as a tool to become more culturally competent, or aware, and create opportunities within organizations that foster an environment of support and leadership to all employees.

Information garnered during this study can inform individuals and organizations about wellness strategies that promote and maintain well-being, as well as policies to recruit and retain a productive workforce. Lastly, this inquiry may provide a resiliency strategy to professional Black women who have their sights set on entering management or leadership roles in their organization or industry.

Chapter Summary

Chapter 1 detailed ways in which the African American female executive continues to be underrepresented in many industry sectors (Hispanic Media Sales, Inc., 2002), leading to racial isolation in the workplace. Eagly & Karau (2002) suggested that unfair expectations, biases, and stereotypes create barriers to leadership development for African American females. Schlossberg’s (1984) transition theory offers a resource for navigating anticipated, unanticipated, or nonevents encountered by the African American female leaders working as the sole person of color in an executive-level position within their organizations (Schlossberg, 1984).
Chapter 2 includes a review of the literature focusing on the following categories: historical context of diversity in the workforce, barriers to effective leadership for individuals from marginalized groups, the psychosocial burden associated with the transitioning or shifting undertaken by Black female executives as they navigate their leadership role in a predominantly White organization, and finally, strategies for ensuring health, wellness and well-being while navigating the aforementioned barriers and burdens.

Chapter 3 highlights the design of the research study, methodology, and process of analysis. Chapter 4 provides a detailed analysis of the results and findings, utilizing interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), and Chapter 5 discusses the findings, implications, and recommendations for future studies and application in practice.
Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

Introduction and Purpose

Chapter 2 is a review of the literature and research of the factors that influence the health, wellness, and well-being of Black female executive leaders. Special consideration is given to Black female executives, working in leadership, as the sole woman of color and their strategies to ensure their health, wellness, and well-being.

This chapter reviews the historical context of diversity in the workforce, the barriers to effective leadership for individuals from marginalized groups, the burdens associated with the transitioning or shifting that is undertaken by Black female executives as they navigate their leadership role in predominantly White organizations, and the literature touching on the strategies for ensuring health, wellness, and well-being of Black female executives. This chapter also includes major scholars from the review of the literature. The purpose of this study was to explore the phenomenon of African American female executives holding positions of leadership who are isolated by race, as the only or one of the only persons of color in a predominantly White organization. This was accomplished by highlighting the perceptions of their lived experiences related to their work environment and strategies they employ to ensure their health, wellness and well-being while navigating an executive leadership role.

Literature Review

Historical context of diversity in the workforce. Gemberling (2014) argued that a critical point in history relating to women’s rights and equality occurred in July 1848 at
the Seneca Falls Women’s Convention. Seneca Falls, New York is less than an hour away from Syracuse, New York where this study was conducted. According to *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, during the meeting, Elizabeth Cady Stanton shared a document she wrote called the *Declaration of Sentiments*, outlining 12 resolutions for the moral, economic, and political equality of women, 11 of which passed (Cokely, 2009). Women’s suffrage, or women’s right to vote, was the only resolution that did not pass unanimously, as many thought it was too controversial (Cokely, 2009). It was not until the summer of 1920 that the 19th amendment was made to the U.S. Constitution, granting women the right to vote (History.com Editors, 2010).

Many historians believe the Women’s Rights Convention of 1848 launched the women’s suffrage movement (History.com Editors, 2017). The women’s suffrage movement has been identified as the first wave of feminism, persisting into the early 1960s (Gemberling, 2014). The first wave of feminism focused on the rights of women—primarily the right to vote—which was granted in 1920, but it did not include Black women (Hewitt, 2010). According to Weiss and Brueske (2018), early abolitionists left Black women out of the narratives for fear of interrupting White supremacy practices.

Evans (1997) highlighted the *personal is political* motto adopted by feminists in the second wave. That motto emphasized the focus of the second wave to address legal and political inequality for mostly White, middle-class/affluent women, into the late 1980s (Evans, 2003). Tensions emerged during the second wave as White and Black feminists found points of contention with the ambivalence of the White feminists regarding the interconnected oppression experienced by the Black women who were secondary to the White women’s race, gender, and class (Mann & Huffman, 2005). Even
with tensions mounting, the second wave boasted the passing of the Civil Rights Act (1964) and the Voting Rights Act (1965). The Civil Rights Act banned segregation in public spaces and deemed employment discrimination, based on race, color, religion, or national origin, unlawful. The Voting Rights Act (1965) outlawed the discriminatory practices that resulted in barriers to voting for Black men and women.

The third wave feminism, beginning in the early 1990s, called out the lack of diversity in the narrative of the second wave, recognizing the inability to separate the interconnected identities of race, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, and class (Mann & Huffman, 2005). Around 2012, incorporating the *Me Too* movement and the *Time’s Up* campaigns, a fourth wave of feminism gained widespread traction using social media as a key component of the movement to combat sexual harassment, body shaming, and rape culture (Shiva & Kharazmi, 2019).

The unlawful discriminatory practices addressed in the Civil Rights Act of 1964 highlight the longstanding issue related to the lack of diversity in the workforce. To strengthen the anti-discriminatory provisions enacted by the Civil Rights Act, President Lyndon B. Johnson issued an executive order in 1967 to include gender as a protected class, when affirmative action practices were being enforced. Affirmative action, a term originally introduced by President John F. Kennedy in 1961, is a way to achieve equity in the public workforce that is reflective of the population it serves. This is accomplished through intentional practices of hiring, educating, and training people from historically marginalized groups, which include Black men and women, as well as White women (Nacoste, 1990). Exactly which marginalized group benefitted the most from affirmative
action practices was discussed in several studies (Baunach, 2002; Strolovitch, 1998, Thomas, 2002).

Baunach (2002) conducted a logistic regression analysis of the 1996 General Social Survey data to compare three explanations of attitudes relating to gender-based affirmative action practices versus attitudes relating to race-based affirmative action practices. The study revealed that gender-based affirmative action was deemed less of a threat than race-based affirmative action. The findings are in alignment with Strolovitch (1998) who argued that White women were the greatest benefactors of affirmative action programs as they were favored over others from marginalized groups when competing for employment.

Regardless of the benefactors of affirmative action, the attainment of workforce equity and the implementation of affirmative action practices were met with challenges. Thomas (2002) highlighted a challenge affirmative action practices faced in the United States. The focus was largely on the quota or meeting the appropriate number of marginalized employees and not on training or development of colleagues, resulting in a lack of investment in a given organization’s human capital. Harrison, Kravitz, Mayer, Leslie, and Lev-Arey (2006) stated that the discourse relative to affirmative action centered around meritocracy and individualism; those in opposition argued that individuals should be judged solely on their merit, while proponents of affirmative action argued that the history of discriminatory hiring practices persisted and required intentional actions to combat the separate but equal narrative.

The fight for a more inclusive workforce continued with the Equal Employment Opportunity Act, signed by Richard Nixon in 1969, which mandated that the United
States government provide equal employment opportunities for all U.S. citizens, without regard to race, age, religion, handicap, or identification as a member of any other marginalized group (Sugrue, 2006). Marginalized groups are identified by the discrimination they encounter based on their identity and their exclusion from typical economic, cultural, or political benefits (Bhalla & Lapeyre, 1997).

**Barriers to leadership.** Black women may identify with navigating dual marginalization as they encounter racism from White counterparts and sexism from Black men resulting in multiple stigmatization (Remedios & Snyder, 2015). The duality of being both Black and female can prove to be a barrier to effective leadership in top-level positions within an organization (Buchanan & Settles, 2018), as these women navigate the intersectionality of their identities. Intersectionality was first introduced by Crenshaw, in 1989, as a way of highlighting the lived experiences of Black women, many of whom had been left out of the conversations relating to feminism and racism because of the overlapping discrimination (Walby, Armstrong, & Strid, 2012).

Dual marginalization and intersectionality are similar because they both speak to the interconnectedness of identifying with more than one stigmatized identity and the inability to separate lived experiences based on just one identity (Fattoracci, Revels-Macalianao, & Huynh, 2020). Instead of struggling to separate lived experiences, one way in which Black women have navigated dual marginalization in the workplace is through shifting. Shorter-Goeden (2004) conducted a qualitative study of 196 African American women to reveal the coping strategies of Black women to mitigate stressors relating to racism and sexism. The findings show that Black women use various strategies including shifting or role flexing to accommodate others in response to oppression.
Shifting includes altering behaviors, attitudes, and appearances in order to fit in with or be accepted by others (Shorter-Gooden, 2004).

Fattoracci et al. (2020) conducted a quantitative study of 801 participants identifying as members of a dually marginalized group through an intersectional lens. The researchers performed a three-step sequential multiple regression analyses. The study found that intersectional microaggressions predict manifestations of anxiety, social isolation, and perceptions of access to essential information for dually marginalized individuals, all of which are potential barriers to effective leadership. Sue et al. (2007) expressed microaggressions as subtle, common, and often daily expressions and indignities that, regardless of intent, communicate derogatory racial slurs or offenses toward marginalized groups. Historically, the lived experiences of individuals from dually marginalized groups are often left out, trivialized, or ignored (Fattoracci et al. 2020), but this research study contributes to the knowledge relating to the lived experiences of those identified as being dually marginalized.

Buchanan and Settles (2018) postulated that the dual marginalization of Black women navigating their leadership role leads to feelings of isolation relating to the lack of diversity and inclusion. The lack of diversity and cultural representation in executive leadership positions allows for a sense of invisibility to emerge for the Black female executive leader. Invisibility lends itself to feelings of being overlooked and left out of decisions and policy-making that may inevitably impact the individual who feels invisible (Buchanan & Settles, 2018). Those feelings of exclusion are in alignment with identifying as an individual from a marginalized group who, as previously stated, is often excluded from typical economic, cultural, or political benefits (Bhalla & Lapeyre, 1997).
Secondary to the invisibility of women in leadership, they have faced barriers to leadership ascent, metaphorically referred to as the glass ceiling (Surawicz, 2016), limiting access to executive-level leadership opportunities. The term glass ceiling has been cited numerous times since the phenomenon was presented by Hymowitz and Schellhardt (1986). Hymowitz and Schellhardt explored barriers to career ascension in leadership for aspiring female executives and equated the stagnant career progression to that of a ceiling made of glass, where women aspired to be leaders but could not gain access to those positions predominantly held by men. For Black women, that barrier to the executive suite may be better represented as a concrete ceiling (Catalyst, 2004; Dickens et al., 2019), as Black women are absent from the top-level CEO positions in any Fortune 500 company (McGirt, 2017).

Further addressing the call for a more inclusive workforce established in the Civil Right Act (1965), in 1991, the Department of Labor formed the Federal Glass Ceiling Commission (FGCC) to explore and recommend interventions to address barriers to career progression for individuals from marginalized groups, such as women and minorities (Breger, 1992). The research conducted by the FGCC established three levels of barriers for women and minorities:

- Societal barriers – outside direct control of businesses,
- Internal structural barriers – directly controlled by businesses, and

The report highlighted the perceptions of both corporate leaders and their employees. In the report, it was explained that perceptions, true or not, perpetuate the
existence of the glass ceiling barrier. It was further noted that perceptions are what people believe, and people translate their beliefs into behaviors, stereotypes, and biases (U.S. Glass Ceiling Commission, 1995). Stereotypes provide individuals with convenient resources of information for processing, potentially influencing how Black women are viewed, evaluated, and treated in the workplace (Reynolds-Dobbs, Thomas, & Harrison, 2008). Burke, Koyuncu, and Fiksenbaum (2008) posited that the biggest obstacles to career advancement for individuals from marginalized groups are the stereotypes, biases, and behaviors of their colleagues.

Societal barriers, such as stereotypes, implicit biases, and discriminatory behaviors, have established a labyrinth of obstacles creating a deficit in executive leadership opportunities for women (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Research studies suggest that a team-based approach to work and an increased focus on diversity within many organizations has resulted in a more inclusive workforce (Aysola et al., 2018; Herring, 2009). Yet women, who make up nearly half of the labor force, only occupy 5% of CEO positions in both the S&P 500 and Fortune 500 companies (Catalyst, 2019).

Leadership stereotypes pose a barrier because society has preconceived notions regarding the characteristics of a leader. Koenig, Eagly, Mitchell, & Ristikari (2011) conducted a meta-analysis of 69 studies related to stereotypes and leadership. The researchers concluded that stereotypes about leadership characteristics were skewed to favor masculine attributes. Those stereotypical attributes included dominance, aggression, competitiveness, and rationality (Burger & Cosby, 1999).

Player, De Moura, Leite, Abrams, and Tresh (2019) studied hiring practices of 297 participants in a quantitative study about leadership potential and performance for
male and female candidates. The research findings suggest that stereotypes associated with candidates’ gender influenced the hiring manager’s assessment of their leadership potential. Men were favored for having greater leadership potential, consequently resulting in missed opportunities for the female candidates.

Ramsey (2017) conducted a qualitative study of 237 participants to investigate the level of importance specific leadership attributes have as determinants of success. The study concluded that demonstrating agentic traits of dominance and authority, often attributed to men, versus communal traits of compassion and sensitivity, often associated with women, were of greater importance when determining the success of a leader.

Eagly and Karau (2002) offered that people have strong implicit biases about leadership attributes, often preferring leaders who exude independence and authority; traits often associated with men. Biases and stereotypes influence self-perception and prejudice from others, which ultimately influences how people engage (Sanchez-Hucles, & Davis, 2010). Negative historical depictions of Black women led to stereotypes, perceptions, and biases that continue to serve as barriers and roadblocks to the educational and employment opportunities of Black women (Williams & Rucker, 2000).

Biases influence the choices we make, the spaces we occupy, and the people with whom we choose to engage (Hewstone, Rubin, & Willis, 2002). Implicit, or unconscious, bias is expressed when an individual rejects societal stereotypes but unconsciously makes judgements of others based on some of the same stereotypes they reject (Greenwald & Krieger, 2006). In-group favoritism is often the result of biases (Soble, 1982), which can influence hiring practices and leadership development access for those in the out-group (Kaufman & Grace, 2011; Neckerman & Kirschenman, 1991), creating a barrier for the
African American female executive leader. In-group favoritism becomes apparent when hiring preference is given exclusively to candidates who fit the description of a homogenous group (Galinsky & Moskowitz, 2000).

Discrimination is another barrier for African American women navigating their leadership experiences (Rosser-Mims, 2010). Abbink and Harris (2019) conducted a qualitative study with 466 participants to determine the motivating factors for discrimination from the in-group against the out-group. The study found that discrimination against the out-group was only likely to occur when the groups were in conflict or competition.

Johnson and Hekman (2016) asked 307 working adults to review a hiring decision made by a fictional manager. The research sought to determine if leaders from marginalized groups were penalized by others in terms of perceived competence as a leader. The qualitative study found that leaders from marginalized groups were rated poorly if they hired someone who looked like them—unless they were a White male.

Brady, Isaacs, Reeves, Burroway, and Reynolds (2011) conducted a quantitative study using logistic regression, which focused on the characteristics of an organization that predict the sex of the chief executive. The study gathered a sample of 3,691 executives from 444 Fortune 500 companies. The authors’ analyses revealed that women are less likely chief executive officers or chief operating officers within the Fortune 500 companies, including zero African American females in the c-suite of any Fortune 500 company (Brady et al., 2011).

Rosser-Mims (2010) analyzed historical leadership ascension for Black women through the Black feminist lens. She highlighted decades of discrimination, which she
asserted had become grossly institutionalized and nearly invisible to the uncritical eye. Her recommendation was more of a call to action. She emphasized solidarity as a strategy to rebuff discriminatory practices that present barriers to positive leadership experiences for the African American female executive leader. The internal/structural policies and procedures within an organization perpetuate the narrative about institutionalized discriminatory practices that result in impenetrable barriers for the out-group (Rosser-Mims, 2010).

Internal structural barriers to leadership development, such as gender bias, inadequate mentorship, insufficient training and inequitable human resource practices, for individuals from marginalized groups within an organization have been identified in the research (Byrd & Stanley, 2009; Hauer et al., 2014; Khosrovani & Ward, 2011). According to a meta-analysis conducted by Koch, D’Mello, and Sackett (2015), bias and discrimination based on gender was identified as an internal/structural barrier for women in some organizations. Their analysis highlighted gender role congruity theory of prejudice toward female leaders, citing that societal stereotypes of women tend to be incongruent with the perception of socially acceptable attributes of a leader (Eagly & Karau, 2002). The evidence indicates that men were preferred for male-dominated leadership jobs, such as construction, which is aligned with role congruity theory, but no preference was found for either gender in female-dominated jobs, such as teaching (Koch et al., 2015).

Gender bias persists when socially acceptable attributes of a leader conflict with the desire to become a parent. The communal traits of a leader, typically attributed to women, are expressed in the caregiver role (Bridges, Etaugh, & Barnes-Farrell, 2002).
Women are often thought of as the primary caregiver for children in the home (Van Esterik, 1995), which can be conflicting for the female executive leader (Ely, Stone, & Ammerman, 2014). Often, women raising young children are left out of leadership-development opportunities because it is assumed that they are not able to prioritize work obligations (Hill, Miller, Benson, & Handley, 2016). This is another example of role congruity theory. The challenge of establishing and maintaining work/life balance when becoming a parent is challenging for many leaders, especially female leaders (Eagly & Carli, 2002).

Eagly and Carli (2002) proposed the theory of role congruity of prejudice toward female leaders. Through a review of literature relevant to their theory, evidence was found to support their assumptions of the consequences associated with the perception of role incongruity. The two consequences emphasized that women are favored less than men when occupying leadership roles and that barriers exist for women aspiring to leadership roles or to being successful in leadership roles that they occupy.

A meta-analysis explored by Bass (1998) found evidence that women, more than men, tend to espouse a more transformational style of leadership, particularly the aspect of transformational leadership that focuses on the development and mentorship of subordinates (Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001). But data show men occupy the majority of executive leadership positions in the S&P and Fortune 500 companies (Hispanic Media Sales, Inc., 2002), indicating a lack of leaders focused on mentorship.

Access to mentors is a critical factor in leadership development (Chang, Longman, & Franco, 2014) and organizations that fail to provide adequate opportunities for mentorship create internal barriers to leadership development for women in their
organization (Kay & Wallace, 2009). Mentorship can be a formal or informal transfer of social and/or professional resources and skills considered essential to leadership development, career advancement, and psychosocial well-being (Chow & Chan, 2008; Ensher & Murphy, 1997; Kay & Wallace, 2009).

Rasheem et al. (2018), in their qualitative, phenomenological study of 38 Black women, identified mentorship as a significant contributor to success, asserting that barriers to leadership development and ascension are established if African American females are isolated and not afforded mentors.

A qualitative, phenomenological study explored the issues of culturally competent mentors for African American female superintendents in public schools (Shorter-Gooden, 2004). The study included the narratives of eight African American women who were either serving as superintendents at the time of the study or recently had served in the role. A recurring theme from the study indicated that despite the credentials of the African American female superintendent candidate, she would benefit a great deal more by having a White male mentor, as access to social capital is governed by the mentor (Shorter-Gooden, 2004).

Kelch-Oliver et al. (2013) conducted a literature review that highlighted concepts presented as barriers that keep African American women from excelling as executives and leaders. Their literature review focused primarily on the same gender/same race mentorship model. They asserted that mentorship must begin earlier in the career-development process; namely, during undergraduate study, and it should continue through graduate and professional settings, ultimately resulting in an increase of African American female leaders (Kelch-Oliver et al., 2013).
Khosrovani and Ward (2011) asserted that the number of African Americans in a position to move into management may be lower without mentorship. Their mixed-methods research engaged 187 African Americans living and working in Houston, Texas about their perception of career opportunities within a predominantly White organization. The findings indicate racial discrimination and inequality within the companies. The data revealed the perception of mentorship and training as a catalyst for promotion and success. More than half of the participants reported never having a mentor, and only 19% report being adequately trained.

Leadership development is considered a critical factor in the success of a leader (Lord & Hall, 2005), requiring self-motivation, self-awareness, and self-regulation (Day, Fleenor, Atwater, Sturm, & McKee, 2014). Still, biases and discrimination create barriers to access and/or inadequate training opportunities for African American female leaders (Key et al., 2012).

Use of content and thematic analyses to evaluate patterns of leadership-development goal statements of 92 undergraduate students found a significant difference based on gender. In their study, Rosch, Boyd, & Duran (2014) posited that men tended to be more interested in specific skills development, while women focused more on leadership trait development. However, the practice of leadership goal development for marginalized group members were reportedly insignificant compared to their White counterparts. Using Cramer’s phi to establish the significance of the effect size relative to gender and self-identified learning goals, a small-to-moderate effect was found at .22. The research identifies a theme of the perception that women need to develop leadership traits, where men are natural leaders and need only to develop specific skills.
A nonexperimental, comparative study evaluated the varied research related to factors that influence female leaders’ success based on the core variable of race. Key et al. (2012) performed chi-squared and $t$ tests with the data collected from a sample of 738 female leaders. The findings assert that White women and African American women face similar gender obstacles, but the factors that determine their leadership development experiences differ significantly. The results are consistent with the assumptions from Key et al. (2012) that there are fewer opportunities and greater barriers to career and leadership development for non-White women.

According to a qualitative study conducted by Aldulaimi (2018), career and leadership development are typically carried out by human resource professionals. The study included 32 employees within an organization who were interested in leadership development opportunities. The study found evidence that leadership development programs are useful in filling leadership gaps. Further, the level of effectiveness was enhanced when organizations were purposeful in the selection of participants and provided support throughout each phase of the leadership-development process.

In a mixed-methods study of experiences of women in the workplace, conducted by Huang, Krivkovich, Starikova, Yee, and Zanoschi (2019), 68,500 employees from 77 companies across the United States and Canada participated. According to the research, Black women were significantly underrepresented, much less likely than their counterparts to be promoted to manager or receive support from superiors, and more likely to face daily discrimination (Figure 2.1). While the vast majority of respondents, over 90%, affirmed that prioritizing gender and racial diversity leads to better results in
business, less than half reported seeing gender diversity as a company priority, and only 22% reported viewing racial diversity as a priority in their organization (Huang, 2019).


Human resource professionals follow directives from government entities relative to hiring practices, family leave, and discrimination in the workplace, all of which are potential barriers or burdens for African American female executive leaders (Schwanke, 2013). Policies influencing hiring practices, such as those associated with affirmative action and the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), are controversial, with opposition mainly from conservatives—both Black and White—who argue that civil rights laws are an intrusion and an over-reach of the government or patronizing to
Blacks (Menand, 2020). But understanding the characteristics of the social environment that created the need for implementation and enforcement of such laws is paramount (Libertella, Sora, & Natale, 2007).

Although experiences relating to poverty and prejudice are not universal for all African Americans, disproportionately, access and opportunities are inhibited by race and class (Bowman, Comer, & Johns, 2018). According to Reardon (2015), the impact on short- and long-term achievements can be experienced in nearly every aspect of life and at every income level for Blacks. Achievements affected by discrimination for marginalized populations include housing, employment, health care, education, and social acceptance (Pager & Shepherd, 2008). The systemic barriers and discrimination experienced by many in the Black community continue to persist today in society and in the workplace (W.K. Kellogg Foundation, 2014).

The EEOC is a longstanding federal agency charged with administering and enforcing civil rights laws relating to hiring practices and workplace discrimination (Hirsh, 2009). The EEOC website reports that lack of funding for the EEOC has resulted in a 14% decrease in full-time staff to investigate claims of workplace discrimination. The inability of the EEOC to carry out its mission, due to lack of staff, leaves those most vulnerable—those from marginalized populations,—without protection from the type of discriminatory practices that can risk an individual’s economic security and derail career ascension (Hirsh, 2009).

Women are particularly vulnerable to career disruption after giving birth if they are denied access to adequate paid leave. Further, women without access to paid leave tend to more likely quit their jobs after giving birth than those with paid leave (Laughlin,
But the private sector only accounts for about 12% of U.S. workers who have access to paid family leave through their employer (Klerman, Daley, & Pozniak, 2012). There are only five states in the United States with programs that offer temporary disability for women who have recently given birth. Most states require women to rely on leave provided voluntarily by an employer to have paid time off from work after giving birth (Klerman et al., 2012).

Although 60% of employees in the United States are protected under the Family and Medical Leave Act, when confronted with the decision to choose between unpaid leave and leaving the workforce altogether, many women choose to leave and pursue other resources of income (Klerman et al., 2012). Further, for the employees who choose to stay and are offered policies that are family-friendly, many are hesitant, fearing that their prioritization of their work commitment will be scrutinized (Klerman et al., 2012), a fear that could be addressed by the EEOC. Lack of funding for the EEOC, designed as a safeguard to barriers and burdens for marginalized individuals in the workforce, leaves those same people vulnerable to discriminatory practices and missed opportunities. Barriers and burdens are often a result of stereotypes, biases, and societal perceptions, as mentioned previously when discussing the glass ceiling.

**Burden on health, wellness, and well-being.** Friedan (1963), the woman praised for publishing the first text on modern feminism, offered early evidence of a burden on the health, wellness, and well-being of women (Lopata, 1975). She offered that it was important to challenge the stereotype of the satisfied housewife and highlight the inner voice of women who wanted something more than to simply be a wife and mother. hooks (1984), noted for her work in expanding the narrative of feminist theory to include the
experiences of Black women, drew attention to the classist and racist nature of Friedan’s (1963) work.

In 1984, hooks shed light on the burdens Black women bear when navigating multiple forms of oppression. Later, Crenshaw (1989) introduced the term intersectionality in 1989 to further express those multiple forms of oppression expressed by hooks (Taylor, 1998). The concept of intersectionality calls attention to the overlap of systemic oppression and discrimination based on various social identities such as race, class, and gender (Carbado, Crenshaw, Mays, & Tomlinson, 2013).

The dawn of feminism drew attention to the experiences of educated, middle class, White women claiming to incorporate the experiences of all American women. hooks (1984) argued that the call to action that Friedan (1963) demanded in her feminist expressions rhetorically placed privileged White women in the same social class as oppressed women, without regard to race or class (Friedman, 1995). Parlea-Buzatu (2011) found, in their literature review, evidence to support the assumed gap between rhetoric and reality faced by African American women regarding equitable access to opportunities in the workforce. The societal perception of African American women as ill-prepared in executive leadership positions establishes a burden on the health, wellness, and well-being of that cohort of African American women.

Sims (2008) summarized the lived experiences of 17 African American females in a predominantly White institution. The phenomenological study sought to identify a connection between the reported experiences and the lack of social communication and interaction with other ethnic/racial groups. The study found African American females persisted through the lack of relationships with other groups. The findings were in
contrast to the interactional theory of student attrition, posed by Tinto in 1987, which asserted that students who are dissatisfied with their college experience will likely leave the institution (Yorke & Longden, 2004). The findings of the Sims (2008) study spoke to the persistence of the African American female to succeed despite the stressors associated with historical societal stereotypes, biases, and limiting perceptions. Some African American women have internalized a construct for coping with those stressors (Shorter-Gooden, 2004).

The SBW schema is one that has been adopted by many Black women to show a strong face to the world, in the presence of adversity, but it is not without consequence (Green, 2019; Watson & Hunter, 2016). The internalized adoption of the SBW schema as a defense mechanism is noted to be exhausting and a great source of stress, as it is often associated with uncontested self-reliance, affect regulation in predominantly White spaces, caretaking of all others, and forsaking self-care (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2007; Corbin, Smith, & Garcia, 2018; Green, 2019).

Qualitative research by Watson & Hunter (2016) explored the experiences African American women face when identifying with the SBW schema. The phenomenological study of 13 African American women found the schema produced favorable and unfavorable outcomes. The thematic analyses identified positive outcomes relating to self-efficacy, while simultaneously showing unfavorable implications for self-care, indicating that those women do not engage in self-care practices.

Watson-Singleton (2017) conducted a study with a sample of 158 African American women to test if the perception of emotional support is a mediating factor between the SBW schema and psychological distress. SPSS 22.0 was utilized for the
analyses. The results suggest that the SBW schema is directly related to both psychological distress in African American women and the perception of a lack of emotional support. The research asserted that, while African American women may persist through established barriers, they may not tend to personal needs, resulting in negative outcomes relating to their health, wellness, and well-being (Watson-Singleton, 2017).

Donovan and West (2015) conducted a quantitative study using multiple regression, Pearson’s correlations, and an analyses of variance to examine the moderating role of the SBW schema on stress and mental health of African American women. The study, utilizing a sample of 92 Black female college students, reveals that embracing the SBW schema increases vulnerability to symptoms of depression that are related to stress for Black women. A nonexperimental, descriptive study found, through its analyses of online surveys relating to rates of depression for African American and White female college students, African American women reported significantly greater amounts of depressive symptomatology ($M = 24.61$) in comparison to the White females ($M = 15.68$), ($F (1,377) = 61.434, p < .001$) (Longmire-Avital & Robinson, 2018).

Several studies have highlighted the positive relationship between high endorsement of SBW and poor health outcomes (Corbin et al., 2018; Donovan & West, 2015; Green, 2019; Watson-Singleton, 2017). Black women who ascribe to the SBW schema as a coping mechanism against racism and associated stereotypes have higher incidences of harmful health outcomes such as hypertension, depression, anxiety, suicidality, diabetes, and other chronic diseases (Donovan & West, 2015; Green, 2019; Kwate, Valdimarsdottir, Guevarra, & Bovbjerg, 2003).
Neblett, Bernard, and Banks (2016) examined the moderating roles of gender and socioeconomic status in relation to racial discrimination experiences and emotional well-being. The participants, 171 African American men and women, were recruited for the study. Regression analyses indicated that young men from lower socioeconomic circumstances and women from higher socioeconomic circumstances were most susceptible to racial discrimination having an impact on their well-being. The women from higher socioeconomic backgrounds were found to have higher incidences of race-related stressors most commonly associated with microaggressions. Microaggressions can be described as subtle, conscious, or unconscious exchanges resulting in hostile, derogatory, or negative prejudicial slights, degradations, and insults, whether intended or unintended, that occur daily (Neblett et al., 2016). Microaggressions are influenced by biases and perceptions that perpetuate race-related stressors (Constantine & Sue, 2007).

Findings of the Neblett et al. (2016) study highlighted the possible negative effect of leadership ascension, often associated with higher income, on the well-being of African American female executive leaders. Perceptions, biases, and stereotypes that create barriers between colleagues and expand gaps in achievement at nearly all levels of education and career development can be mitigated through mentorship and creating an inclusive working environment. Further, mentorship has been identified as one of the most critical factors in helping those from marginalized groups achieve career success (Dickens et al., 2019).

**Ensuring health, wellness, and well-being.** In addition to mentorship as a critical factor in closing achievement gaps and increasing access to opportunities for African American women, other interventions have been explored that address the
stressors that occur as a result of experiences in the workplace, which have a negative impact on health, wellness, and well-being. Mays (1995) conducted an exploratory study of 102 Black women who participated in a focus support group model as a community-based intervention to address employment-related stressors in Black women. The study indicated that participation in the workforce is a potential stressor for Black women based on their marginalized status. Further, the study found evidence in support of culture- and gender-appropriate community interventions as potentially effective strategies for stress reduction (Mays, 1995).

In a study of 68,500 employees among 77 companies in the United States and Canada conducted by Huang et al. (2019), it was noted that 38% of employees of color are often the only, or one of the only, people of their race and ethnicity in the room. That experience was also referred to as *token status* or *numerical minority*, and it comes with increased experiences of microaggressions (Turco, 2010). That author offered strategies to counteract the experiences of the individuals, which included recommendations to foster connections among women and other marginalized individuals, through mentorship or staffing projects across job functions to reduce the stressors associated with the burden of isolation (Turco, 2010).

Holder, Jackson, and Ponterotto (2015) conducted a study with the purpose of examining experiences of microaggressions in the workplace and coping strategies of African American female leaders. The qualitative study comprised semi-structured interviews with 10 African American women in senior leadership within corporate America. The findings indicate that coping strategies existed for that cohort of participants to include, among others, support networks, mentorship, and self-care.
Identifying strategies for effective coping to ensure the health, wellness, and well-being for African American female leaders was explored through the lens of Schlossberg’s (1984) transition theory with respect to the intersectionality of race, gender, and social class of the participants. Schlossberg (1984) first presented transition theory in an article discussing human adaptation. Since then, Schlossberg’s (1984) theory has been applied to various contexts. Swain (1991) applied this theory to individuals who retired from sports to focus on their careers. Kinicki and Latack (1990) used this theory in their study relating to coping with involuntary job loss. McCarthy and Berger (2008) employed this theory as the foundation for a study of female educators who transitioned into a male-dominated technology field. Griffin and Gilbert (2015) suggested that transition theory can be appropriately applied to help institutions learn different ways of offering transitional support and resources to student veterans.

When exploring the transitions African American women face while navigating a career in executive leadership, transition theory can be applied. Barclay (2015) posited that transition is the internal psychological process experienced by individuals while they are adapting to an external change. Barclay (2015) also asserted that change is more of an event, while transition is better described as a process over time. Leaders may experience changes that involve duties associated with their current positions, shifts in their roles within their organizations, or even a change in professions, but according to the life span theory, the transition that is related to the change involves a deeper shift in leaders’ self-concept, which happens over time (Super, Savickas, & Super, 1996). Super et al. (1996) developed theories relating to life and career development that emphasize the importance
of self-concept (Figure 2.2), which he asserted develops over time as a result of lived experiences.

![Life Career Rainbow](image)


Schlossberg (1987) presented her transition model in three major parts: (a) approaching transitions, (b) taking stock of coping resources, and (c) taking charge. This theory captures the Black female executive leadership trajectory of ascending the leadership ladder and the often-inherent challenges. Schlossberg’s (1984) transition
theory is appropriate because it can be applied to African American female leaders who are transitioning into a new leadership role, those navigating an event or nonevent as an established leader or transitioning out of a job whether the transition is voluntary or involuntary. Moreover, the theory speaks to mechanisms that ensure wholeness as one negotiates systems and/or relationships.

Chapter Summary

The various stereotypes and manifestations of personas, both imposed and/or adopted by the African American female executive leader, may not only impact her ascension to the top-level executive positions but they may also impact the perceptions of her leadership ability (Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010; Schwanke, 2013; Shorter-Gooden, 2004). Mitigating factors, such as an inclusive working environment, authentic leadership style, and mentorship, can break down barriers to leadership ascension for aspiring African American female executives (Cottrill et al., 2014; Dickens et al., 2019; Rasheem et al., 2018).

The literature review sought to explore research relating to the factors that influence the health, wellness, and well-being of Black female executive leaders. While some research has identified strategies for mitigating the negative impact of being identified as a member of a marginalized group, there was little consensus in the literature regarding strategies to ensure the overall well-being of the Black female executives working in racially isolated leadership positions.

This chapter reviewed the historical context of diversity in the workforce, the barriers to effective leadership for individuals from marginalized groups, the burdens associated with the transitioning or shifting that is undertaken by Black female executives
as they navigate their leadership role in predominantly White organizations, and the literature touching on the strategies for ensuring health, wellness, and well-being of Black female executives.

Chapter 3 outlines the study’s methodological approach to the research. The methodology guided the data collection process, cycles for coding the data, interpretation, and analysis of the data.
Chapter 3: Research Design Methodology

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to introduce the research methodology utilized for studying the phenomenon of African American female executives who hold positions of leadership and who are isolated by race. The study highlights Black female leaders’ perceptions of their lived experiences relating to their work environment and strategies they employed to ensure overall well-being while navigating an executive leadership role. This study employed a qualitative methodology, specifically, interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). Creswell and Creswell (2018) suggested that a phenomenological approach is determined to be the most appropriate strategy for approaching research requiring a deep understanding of the lived experiences common to a specific group of people.

This study sought to answer the following research questions, utilizing each factor from Schlossberg’s (1984) 4-S system:

1. Self: What are the lived experiences of African American female executives in their existing work environments that relate to mentorship, support, and well-being?
2. Situation: What are the perceptions of African American female leaders on the dynamics that influence their health and wellness in their work environments?
3. Support: In what ways do African American female executives describe their support networks?
4. Strategies: What strategies do African American female executive leaders employ to ensure their well-being?

The U.S. Census Bureau (2018) reported that women make up a majority of the U.S. population at 50.8%). Although women have made great strides in education and career advancement, making up 57% and 59% of undergraduate and graduate degrees, respectively, and 52% of reported mid-level leadership positions (Corbett & Hill, 2015) they continue to trail behind men in the attainment of executive-level leadership positions (Hispanic Media Sales, Inc., 2002). In 2018, only one of the top 10 nonprofit organizations in the United States, was led by a female CEO (Barrett, 2019). Statistics from Catalyst (2019) show that women made up 5% of all CEO-level positions in S&P 500 companies.

Schwanke (2013) asserted that women are underrepresented in areas of governance, directorship, and executive leadership across many nonprofit industry sectors. For all women, the ascension to corporate success continues to be an uphill battle (Evans, 2014). Research related to the experiences of African American females in executive leadership is limited, likely because it has been incorporated into feminist literature, inadvertently silencing the unique voices of Black women (Waring, 2003). Moreover, African American women navigate the world with the duality of being both a woman and a member of a racially marginalized group (Collins, 2000). According to Davis (2016), the intersectionality of sex and race has a significant impact on the leadership development of Black women (Davis, 2016). Crenshaw (1989) posited that the experiences of Black women cannot simply be included in previously established
narratives about the female experience or the Black experience because both of those narratives have finite references.

Enduring the negative stereotypes and the assumptions of Black people, which are imposed by those in positions of privilege and power, are well-documented in American history (Boskin, 1988). Jewell (2012) suggested that race, gender, and class are the primary determinants of one’s position on the social hierarchy of discrimination, with Black women positioned at the lowest level. Leadership is based on a dominant perspective, which is classified as the middle-class White male (Byrd & Stanley, 2009). Moreover, the lack of culturally competent support systems and networks (Howard-Hamilton, 2003; Patton, & Harper, 2003), coupled with the internalization of negative societal stereotypes (Sims, 2008), may cause African American females to experience psychological distress.

Working as the only, or one of the only, persons of color in leadership impacts the emotional well-being of the African American female executive, according to Jones and Pritchett-Johnson (2018). Henry et al. (2011) contended that in order to maximize African American women’s potential in an organization, they must be provided with the support necessary to facilitate their psychosocial development and preserve their emotional well-being. This study sought to explore the phenomenon associated with the lived experiences of African American women and their perceptions of working in racially isolated leadership roles. Using the tenets of Schlossberg’s transition theory (1984) as a lens, this study focused on the strategies employed by participants to address their health, wellness, and well-being.
An interpretative phenomenological analysis approach guided this study and allowed for a deeper understanding of the phenomenon. This methodology sought to explore how the participants made sense of their lived experiences as it related to a specific phenomenon, and allowed the researcher to acknowledge the participants’ preconceptions about the phenomenon (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012). IPA was developed by Heidegger (1962) who drew upon the foundational concepts of phenomenology and hermeneutics. Dowling (2007) reported that Edmund Husserl is credited with originally developing phenomenology as a way of exploring and understanding human thought through a researcher’s unbiased experiences of a phenomenon. Heidegger (1962) added hermeneutics to Husserl’s (1913) phenomenological approach, wherein he acknowledged that observers and researchers approach experiences with their own preconceptions and there is no way to fully separate the individual from their preconceptions.

Hermeneutics is derived from the ancient Greek god Hermes, who was an intercessor who interpreted messages from gods to mortals in Greek mythology. Hermeneutics requires the researcher to interpret an individual’s expressed perception of their lived experiences and situations (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012). Heidegger (1962) asserted that before engaging in observation or research of a phenomenon, the observer must acknowledge their preconceptions and understand that they bring their personal level of understanding and interpretation into each interaction. The IPA method is often referred to as a double interpretation process, where the participants of the study offer their understanding and experience of a phenomenon followed by the researcher’s attempts to further interpret the data collected from the participants (Smith, 2008). The researcher attempts to further interpret the data by engaging in self-reflection throughout
the study, through reflective statements. Alase (2017) asserted that the IPA method requires researchers to bracket themselves away from the lived experiences of the study participants by describing their relationship with the phenomenon at the start of the study. The reflective notes of the researcher are a tool for bracketing that help the reader understand how the research journey unfolded (Alase, 2017). Reflective notes in this study were completed by this researcher immediately after each interview in an effort to capture the impressions and feelings of the researcher in a setting that ensured comfort and confidentiality.

Reflexivity in qualitative research is considered a useful tool to bolster the credibility of the study. Reflexivity, through the use of reflective notes, provides an opportunity for researchers to be transparent about their own positionalities, biases, and personal values that could impact data collection and analysis. The researcher of this current study utilized reflective note taking and bracketing methods to address any bias regarding her personal experience as a Black woman working as the sole woman of color in a leadership position within her organization.

Nine participants were recruited for this study. Smith et al. (2012) suggested that IPA studies be conducted with small sample sizes with as few as three participants for novice researchers, and as many as 10 interviews for more experienced researchers.

**Research Context**

This study was conducted in the Central New York State region. Central New York is comprised of five counties including: Cayuga, Cortland, Madison, Onondaga, and Oswego. The region has an estimated population of 780,000 (CNY Initiative, 2015). The major urban center of the region and the primary location of the study was the city of
Syracuse, which is located in Onondaga County. In 2018, the total population in Syracuse, New York was 142,749 with a 55% White, 29% Black, 9% Hispanic, and 7% Asian populace (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019).

According to the New York State Department of Labor ([NYSDOL], 2016), the Central New York region identified several priority sectors in which to focus their workforce development efforts. Those sectors included: advanced manufacturing, health care, and agribusiness and food processing, along with tourism and hospitality. The efforts highlighted by the NYSDOL (2016) focused on workforce development—largely for frontline workers and recipients of public benefits—without mention of efforts relating to leadership development or efforts to diversify executive leadership positions. This current study focused on the leadership development for African American female leaders within major job sectors.

**Research Participants**

The top economic sectors and employers in Central New York include health care, education, and government (CNY Initiative, 2015). Choosing participants within Central New York who worked in healthcare, education, government, nonprofit institutions, and private sector fields allowed for greater access, given the concentration of employer types in the researcher’s immediate geographic area.

Padilla-Díaz (2015) posited that eligibility criteria should be explicit to ensure that participants have common experiences regarding the phenomenon. This study included Black female participants from each of the industries mentioned previously within the Central New York region. The participants for this study were recruited using convenience sampling and the snowball approach. Convenience sampling requires
selecting participants who are willing and available and who meet the study criteria (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). In order to identify additional participants, the snowball approach was used by asking the consenting participants of this study to refer other potentially eligible participants they believed would fit the study criteria (Patton, 1990). Inclusion and eligibility criteria for this study included:

- identifying as an African American or Black woman
- working in the Central New York region at the time of the study
- employed in health care, education, government, or other nonprofit institution as a member of the senior leadership team
- working in a racially isolated position, at the time of the study, as the sole woman of color in leadership
- having gained at least 5 years of leadership experience. (The years of experience further ensured common experiences relating to the phenomenon.)

Using the inclusion and eligibility criteria as a starting point, the participants were recruited through networking avenues and professional associations such as professional and social sororities and fraternities. Once the participants were identified and/or referred, contact was made via telephone or email; therefore, adhering to the guidance from the Centers for Disease and Prevention (CDC) and St. John Fisher College, during the COVID-19 global pandemic. Based on the responses, the potential participants received a written message via email containing information relating to the study and requesting the recipients’ intent to participate in this study (Appendix A).

Prior to this study beginning in earnest, the study participants provided their informed consent (Appendix B), which detailed and confirmed their voluntary,
confidential participation. The consent form made clear the participants’ rights and that they could withdraw from the study at any time. The participants were assigned a pseudonym to ensure confidentiality. Creswell and Creswell (2018) emphasized the importance of respecting the privacy of participants by providing false names or pseudonyms for participants and their respective organizations to ensure anonymity.

**Instruments Used in Data Collection**

Semi-structured, face-to-face, one-on-one interviews were conducted (Marshall & Rossman, 2010). The interviews were conducted via the electronic platforms Webex and Zoom, adhering to the guidance from St. John Fisher and the CDC requiring social distancing during the COVID-19 global pandemic. Kvale and Brinkman (2009) suggested that open or semi-structured interviews should be conducted to elicit detailed descriptions of experiences. The phenomenological approach to research suggests a particular protocol should be utilized to collect data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Specifically, a semi-structured interview protocol is to include open-ended questions that are recorded with the participant’s consent and annotated with field notes for reference. McGrath, Palmgren, and Liljedahl (2019) offered recommendations for conducting qualitative research interviews. One tip from the authors is to construct an interview guide and test or pilot the questions.

The interview protocol (Appendix C) was created to fit the parameters of this study. The interview questions were reviewed with colleagues and an academic advisor for validity and relevance to the research questions. The interview questions were piloted with three African American leaders and adapted based on their feedback. Most of the
edits affected length and clarity. The participants of the pilot study were not included in the actual study.

The quality, or reliability and validity, of qualitative research is related to the rigorous nature of the study. Tracy (2010) suggested that rigor, or reliability and validity, in qualitative research is related to the abundance of data, time in the field, sufficient sample or context, and appropriate data collection procedures in terms of field notes, interviewing practices, and analysis procedures. The following section highlights the planned methods that ensured a high-quality qualitative research.

**Procedures for Data Collection**

The preplanned, semi-structured interview questions (Appendix C) helped capture the essence of the experiences of the nine Black female executives who were working in racially isolated positions of leadership at the time of this study. An interview protocol, which included open-ended questions and prompts, was prepared in alignment with the guidance from Smith et al. (2012) regarding constructing an interview protocol for semi-structured interviews. The suggested sequence for constructing an interview protocol, according to Smith et al. (2012) follows:

1. Avoid asking participants the research questions directly. Instead, design interview questions that, when answered by the participants, will allow an opportunity to answer the research questions.
2. Consider the range of topic areas to be explored relating to the overall phenomenon.
3. Consider the most appropriate sequence for the identified topics.
4. Consider how to phrase open-ended questions and prompts appropriately.
5. Engage others to discuss the list of questions and redraft as appropriate.

By posing the questions from the prepared interview protocol during the semi-structured interviews, the researcher was able to elicit the accounts of the participants’ experiences that helped identify the essences of the phenomenon for interpretation by the researcher. An agreed-upon timeframe of approximately 60 minutes, based on their availability, was preplanned with each participant. The time for each interview varied based on the depth of a participants’ response or engagement during the interview. Tracy (2010) emphasized that there is no magic time in the field; the focus was on gathering authentic, meaningful, and significant data (Smith et al., 2012).

Given the social distancing guidelines as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, consents were obtained verbally, using recorded audio and video. The consent forms were provided ahead of time, via email, to participants and reviewed, verbatim, by the researcher prior to the start of each interview. The consent included acknowledgment of voluntary participation and audio recording, along with risk/benefit and absence of compensation for participation in study. Each interview was recorded using the recording function of the online platforms Zoom and Webex. An additional electronic audio-recording device was utilized by the researcher, as a backup, to capture the audio of the interviews.

Interviews were transcribed exclusively by the researcher to maintain confidentiality. The transcription process required immersive listening to the individual interviews for clarity, meaning, and authentication (Martin, 2017). To accomplish the goal of an immersive listening environment, the researcher chose to review the audio recordings in a space with limited distractions.
Data Analysis

After completion of the transcription process, coding began. Coding was accomplished through a process inclusive of describing, classifying, and interpreting, followed by categorizing text into common groups (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Four cycles of coding were utilized to highlight initial themes that resulted in patterns that led to interpretation and an enhanced analysis of the data. The four coding cycles were:

- a priori coding
- in vivo coding
- descriptive coding
- values coding

A priori coding for this study guided the data analysis along with the researcher’s openness to emerging codes that were identified during the analysis. Saldaña (2013) explained that a priori codes are pre-established and relate to attributes, culture, values, attitudes, and beliefs; all of which Saldaña described as essential to studies about identity. In vivo codes followed, allowing for the next step of interpretation. In vivo codes are labels that are the exact words used by the participants (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Descriptive and values coding offered greater insight into the perceptions of the well-being for the Black female executives. Saldaña (2013) explained that descriptive coding is a way of assigning labels to data to summarize a section of qualitative text. Descriptive coding allowed the researcher opportunities to describe the perceptions of the participants regarding positive and negative influences on their health, wellness, and well-being (Wolcott, 2009). Values coding provided the ability to attribute attitudes,
feelings, and beliefs to the information gathered from the participants who actively sought opportunities to maintain their well-being (Saldaña, 2013). Microsoft Word was utilized to create a codebook to assist with the organization, review, analysis, and interpretation of the data. Interpretation of the data involved making sense of the information collected, coined as lessons learned by Lincoln & Guba (2000). Data were interpreted in order to make sense of the identified phenomenon and to highlight the essence of the reported experiences.

Data analysis is the systematic procedure to identify essential features and relationships through interpretation (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). Smith et al. (2012) recommended the following steps to organize and analyze the transcribed data:

Step 1. Researcher immersion: The researcher engages in immersive reading and re-reading of all data from the transcriptions.

Step 2. Initial noting and categorization of themes: The researcher uses exploratory examination of the data to categorize initial themes relating to the preestablished a priori codes, theory, research questions, and in vivo codes from direct participant quotes.

Step 3. Development of emergent themes: The researcher continues more detailed coding as part of the analysis of the data through descriptive and values coding. Coding for significant statements, meaning units, textual and structural descriptions, and description of the experiences are all characteristics of a phenomenological study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).
Step 4. Emergence of themes and patterns: The researcher analyzed the data, revealing various connections of the themes throughout the individual transcripts.

Step 5. Moving to the next transcript: The researcher follows Steps 1-4 with consecutive transcripts, bracketing emergent themes and ideas from previous transcripts.

Step 6. Emergence of patterns across cases: The researcher identifies patterns across cases. This resulted in the emergence of four superordinate themes, each with two subordinate themes, presented in Chapter 4.

Superordinate themes emerge as overarching concepts that bring together a series of related themes across cases (Smith et al., 2012). Subordinate themes are patterns of concepts and ideas found throughout interview transcripts that help support the superordinate theme. The information collected from the study participants provided accounts of experiences and insights relating to the focus of this research. All information that was related to this study and the participants is stored on one laptop, one flash drive, and one audio-recording device. The devices remain password protected with the password known only to the researcher. The devices remain locked in the home office of the researcher when not in use. The data will be retained for a 3-year period then deleted. Disseminated materials from this research study will include aggregate data, and they do not include personal information, in order to protect the privacy of participants. No more than minimal risk was assumed, and although the study participants may not have realized the direct benefits of participation in this study, the researcher is hopeful that the
results of this study may guide future research to promote strategies for health, wellness, and well-being for African American female executives.

Summary

This chapter provided information about the research design and its application to the study and the participants. This qualitative study provided opportunities for this researcher to explore the perceptions and lived experiences of African American female executives working in racially isolated positions of leadership.

Chapter 4 includes the findings from the nine semi-structured interviews conducted with Black female executive leaders from the Central New York State region. The data were coded and then, using an interpretative phenomenological approach, data were analyzed, using the interpretative phenomenological analysis approach. Themes were derived through the four cycles of coding and aligned with the theoretical framework. The research questions were addressed using the insight gleaned from the study participants.
Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

This chapter discusses the information collected from nine individual semi-structured interviews and from the researcher’s reflective journals. Additionally, a summary of findings from the collected data and subsequent coding and analysis process is included in this chapter. Chapter 4 includes emergent themes described with the support of excerpts from participants’ interviews to support the justification of each theme. The conclusion of the chapter provides a summary of the main points.

This study employed a qualitative methodology, specifically, interpretative phenomenological analysis, with the purpose of exploring the phenomenon of Black female executives holding positions of leadership who were isolated by race as the only, or one of the only, persons of color in predominantly White organizations. This was accomplished by highlighting their perceptions of their lived experiences relating to their work environment and strategies they employed to ensure their overall well-being while navigating an executive leadership role.

This study took place in Central New York State with nine Black women who serve as executives in healthcare, education, government, nonprofit institutions, and the private sector. Based on the qualitative, interpretative phenomenological approach, 10 participants were selected for the study through convenience sampling, followed by the snowball approach. Ultimately, a total of nine participants responded and were included in the study. For the analysis of the data, the researcher engaged in the double
hermeneutic process of interpreting the participants’ expressed perceptions of their lived experiences as Black women in executive leadership within predominantly White institutions, as recommended by Smith et al. (2012). Double hermeneutics occurs when the researcher attempts to make sense of the participant’s sense-making of a phenomenon (Smith et al., 2012)

**Research Questions**

Schlossberg’s (1987) 4-S model of navigating transition was applied to align with each of the following research questions to guide this study:

1. What are the lived experiences of African American female executives in their existing work environments that relate to mentorship, support, and well-being?

2. What are the perceptions of African American female leaders on the dynamics that influence their health, wellness, and well-being in their work environments?

3. In what ways do African American female executives describe their support networks?

4. What strategies do African American female executive leaders employ to ensure their well-being?

The following four rounds of coding were applied to each research question to analyze and interpret the data:

- A priori
- In vivo
- Descriptive
Values

Referencing Schlossberg’s (1984) transition theory as the foundational and guiding theory for this study and the impetus for the development of research questions, four superordinate themes emerged, each with two subordinate themes according to the 4-S model from the theoretical framework (See Table 4.1). Schlossberg’s (1984) transition theory employs the 4-S model to explain the four factors that influence the way in which an individual navigates transition. The subsequent grouping of interview questions from the interview protocol (Appendix C) were also aligned according to the theoretical framework (See Tables 4.3, 4.4, 4.6, & 4.7). All four rounds of coding were employed for each research question to identify the recurrent themes.

Table 4.1
Alignment of Themes with Theoretical Framework

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Schlossberg’s 4-S Model Categories</th>
<th>Superordinate Themes</th>
<th>Subordinate Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Self</td>
<td>Self-Awareness</td>
<td>a. Self-regulation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>b. Self-efficacy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Situation</td>
<td>Imbalance</td>
<td>a. Work/life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>b. System navigation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support</td>
<td>Safe Spaces</td>
<td>a. Uninvited</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>b. Circle of trust</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategies</td>
<td>Inner Strength</td>
<td>a. Sacrifice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>b. Prioritization of self-care</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Findings and Analysis

To protect the privacy of the participants and ensure confidentiality, the participants’ actual given names were replaced by pseudonyms throughout the study.

Table 4.2 provides the demographic information for the nine Black female participants,
who, at the time of this study, were all working in the Central New York State region, each having at least 5 years of senior leadership experience.

Table 4.2

*Participant Interview Numbers, Pseudonyms, and Industry*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview #</th>
<th>Participant Pseudonym</th>
<th>Industry</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Marie</td>
<td>Education and Healthcare</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Frances</td>
<td>Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Esther</td>
<td>Private Sector and Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Ayana</td>
<td>Education and Nonprofit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Jessica</td>
<td>Healthcare</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Cynthia</td>
<td>Nonprofit and Government</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Tatiana</td>
<td>Government</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Tamar</td>
<td>Nonprofit and Private Sector</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Keturah</td>
<td>Government</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Research Question 1.** *What are the lived experiences of African American female executives in their existing work environment that relate to mentorship, support, and well-being?*

Table 4.3

*Research question 1 alignment with theory and interview questions*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Question</th>
<th>Theory</th>
<th>Interview Question</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 1                 | Self   | 1. Can you describe a typical working day for you in your role as a leader in your organization?  
|                   |        | 2. Can you describe your leadership style?                                           |
|                   |        | 3. What has been your experience as an African American female executive in your workplace as it relates to mentorship, support, and well-being? |
|                   |        | 4. Why do you stay in the work?                                                     |
**Relationship to theoretical framework.** Self, from Schlossberg’s (1987) 4-S model of coping with transition, pertains to personal characteristics, such as race, gender, stage of career, socioeconomic status, and health status, along with psychological resources an individual has that influence the perception of a transition and the individual’s ability to cope (Schlossberg, 1989). Self was applied as a guide to develop the first research question. In this study, the participants identified as Black women in senior leadership who were in various stages of their careers. The participants identified that they were moving in, moving through, or moving out of their current roles, expressing an awareness of their varied personal health statuses and their regimen, or lack thereof, for self-care and overall well-being.

**Findings.** The participants were asked a series of interview questions from the interview protocol to identify their perceptions of support and mentorship in their work environments to navigate transitions. Transitions were characterized as events or nonevents, such as taking on an additional leadership role, publishing research relating to their current work, or succession planning as they anticipated moving out of their role into retirement. While the participants had varied responses, some shared experiences were identified during data analysis. Self-awareness emerged as a superordinate theme, with self-regulation and self-efficacy as subordinate themes.

**Self-awareness.** The superordinate theme of self-awareness was identified as the result of the recurring reports from the participants who highlighted the personal and psychological tools they used to navigate the impact of their lived experiences as Black women in senior leadership. In the forthcoming narratives, the participants described experiencing a great deal of self-awareness relating to the perceived expectations
imposed upon them from others in their work and home environments, which overlapped to a greater degree because of the COVID-19 pandemic. For the participants who identified as caregivers, there was an additional perceived expectation that they would prioritize the care and enrichment that their children or loved ones would have received outside of the home prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Marie shared that she was pursuing a doctoral degree while working from home full-time, being a wife, and a mother of three “rambunctious children.” When asked about a typical working day, she stated “Um, so yeah, I’ve got my hands full,” referencing the multiple leadership roles and responsibilities she attended to in- and outside of her organization.

That same sentiment relating to the pressure of navigating multiple roles and responsibilities was echoed during the interviews with each of the participants. The nine Black women leaders who participated in this study represented various intersecting identities, which became apparent through the natural course of interviews. Of the nine participants, five (56%) earned or were pursuing terminal degrees (MD, PhD, EdD, etc.), seven (78%) reported currently having more than one leadership title or role, eight (89%) reported being a direct caregiver, and seven (78%) reported being married.

A heightened sense of self-awareness was indicated as the participants shared descriptions of the burden they perceive on them as Black women leaders to self-regulate. The participants expressed the inherent pressure to engage in a continuous process of self-regulation as they navigated their leadership roles with the duality of being both a woman and a member of a racially marginalized group.
Self-regulation. When asked about a typical working day, the women each described an unspoken mandate to consciously monitor their appearance, facial expressions, and communication with colleagues; a routine that the participants attributed directly to being a Black woman. Marie shared how she approached conversations with her supervisor:

I will prep at home, I make notes of things that I want to make sure I get across. I will make sure I’m not getting emotional or talking with my hands, ’cause I do that a lot too. So, there’s a lot of self-regulation when it comes to showing up for work. (Interview 1, Marie, June 9, 2020)

In the same interview, Marie went on to describe in more detail how self-regulation, as a result of her heightened self-awareness, manifested as a form of suppression, using a mask as a metaphor in the following passage, to highlight her experience as a Black female professional in a predominantly White institution:

The mask that you put on when you go to work every day . . . It’s a mask of, you know, what . . . I can’t, I can’t let them see . . . I can’t let them see me sweat. I can’t let them see my vulnerabilities. So, it’s very guarded. It’s very much . . . even if I’m hurting, I look like “I got this.” I got, like, it’s, it’s a fact . . . And it’s exhausting. So for me, what that looks like is double, sometimes double, triple checking emails before I send them because I want to make sure it’s not going to be perceived as tone, or I’m actually using the right words, and it’s not going to come across as aggressive, because I’ve also had that where email communications get completely misconstrued. And I’m like, “wait, that’s not what I meant.” And then having to backtrack. So, I was, like, “all right, I’m just
going to triple check my emails.” Make sure I got no typos, make sure my salutations are appropriate. Just double checking my work. (Interview 1, Marie, June 9, 2020)

Other participants described their experiences with a heightened sense of self-awareness and self-regulation in the work environment as living a double life. Tatiana conveyed the suppression she feels as a weight, stating:

I think that, especially Black women leaders, carry so much weight that you just have to kind of fake the funk almost. You just have to carry it until you drop and because you can’t . . . We don’t have room for people to see us be weak or vulnerable. Even if we feel it in the inside, because that’s not the place. There’s always vipers. There’s always someone at your heels, jealous or wanting what you have or . . . and I don’t even think that’s something that we imagine. I know it’s real. And so, to me, you don’t have time to be tired. Even if you’re tired, you don’t have time to be overly stressed out, even if you are, because society doesn’t allow us to be that way. And so, unless you’re home at night, and then you feel like you’re totally going to emotionally and physically collapse and it’s a safe space for you to be that way, women, and especially women of color. We don’t have that leisure . . . I don’t think most people think about it in that deep of a level, but it’s lots to carry. It is heavy. Your feet hurt, back hurt, you’re . . . (deep sigh) carrying a lot. (Interview 7, June 17, 2020)

Keturah shared similar experiences, including the suppression of emotions. And then a negative is . . . I’m human. I get tired. I get tired of arguing. I get tired of fighting. I get tired of being misrepresented. Misperceptions about me when
you don’t know me, I just, that wears me out sometimes because I haven’t learned how to shield my heart. I don’t want to be cold, but I need a shield around my heart. I don't want . . . (deep sigh) I’m tired of waking up in the middle of the night, thinking about something when I need to sleep, so I could be better in the morning. (Interview 9, June 25, 2020)

*Self-efficacy.* When inquiring about experiences with mentorship and support during their leadership journey from IQ 3, the participants’ responses varied. Even with varied experiences relating to mentorship, all nine of the women indicated that mentorship had value and it typically required a great deal of self-efficacy to find the appropriate support. Their heightened self-awareness as leaders led the women to believe that they either did benefit from, or would have benefitted from a mentoring relationship.

Of the nine interviews, five participants reported some familiarity with formal mentorship; only three of the five were mentored by someone within the organization in which they were working. The other four participants out of the nine participants were very clear about not ever having a formal mentor during their ascent into leadership. Tatiana indicated that there was no single person she could think of who had served as a mentor to her.

It’s hard because you think about who in your life do you want to emulate? And I feel like I’ve gotten to my leadership style because I’ve been around so many . . . I don’t want to say bad leaders, but been around so many instances where it’s like, “that’s not how you’re supposed to talk to people. That’s not how you bring people up. That’s not how you’re supposed to bring people along.” So, there’s been tidbits along the way that have been really important for me that I’ve
gleaned from people. But as far as having someone say, “I’m going to bring you along. I’m going to be your mentor” or even, for me, to call someone back and say, “because of what you did, I am this person,” there’s, like, not one person, I would call. (Tatiana, Interview 7, June 17, 2020)

Esther echoed the same absence of a mentoring relationship during her ascension into leadership, stating, “so, this is kind of shocking, I think. But until probably 4 months ago, I’ve never had a mentor. I’ve never had anyone reach out to me. I’ve never reached out to anyone.” Esther proclaimed that she was shy with a tendency toward introversion outside of her prominent leadership role, and as a result, she never found an opportunity, until very recently, to make that sort of mentoring connection. She shared the following thoughts about her mentorship experience so far, “what I realized by having a mentor is, they can see the blind spots that you cannot see when you are in the midst of whatever you’re going through. (Interview 3, June 11, 2020)

Jessica was one of the participants who reported having experience with formal mentorship through an employer. When asked to describe her experience with mentorship, she expressed that it has been positive, adding, “in situations that I’ve been able to receive it.” She qualified that statement by stating, “sometimes you find mentorship where you can get it,” indicating that mentorship is not always formal (Interview 5, June 14, 2020).

Informal mentorship was prominent in the discussion with the participants. Cynthia and Frances both expressed that mentorship can happen informally through casual engagements and observations of other leaders in the community. Frances asserted that, “mentorship comes in many different forms. There are some people who I’ve just
looked up to who may not know that they have been a mentor to me, but they certainly have, just by me observing and watching what they’ve done” (Interview 2, June 9, 2020).

Cynthia, although having no formal mentors during her leadership ascent, described the benefit of mentorship similar to the way Esther described it, as a primary way to avoid pitfalls and identify blind spots. “I think having a mentor is huge because you don’t know what you don’t know, and you step in there not knowing what you don’t know, you’re gonna run into different problems (Interview 6, June 18, 2020).

Self-efficacy remained an appropriate subordinate theme when hearing from participants their personal reasons for remaining in their leadership roles. Each participant identified a purpose attached to the work they do. Their level of self-awareness allowed them to see the value they added to the spaces they entered and the roles they occupied. Each woman felt strongly that she brought significant skills and abilities to her organization, in hopes of having a positive impact on the community.

Marie stated, in response to the inquiry about why she stayed in her existing leadership role:

My purpose in life is to be of service, in service of my community, in service of my students, to uplift them and improve health outcomes or improve quality of life. That’s part of the reason, actually the only reason. (Interview 1, June 9, 2020)

Frances asserted “I’ve amassed a certain level of influence and leadership that takes years to establish. Right now, I can really begin to influence change” (Interview 2, June 9, 2020).
Esther stated why she remained in the work: “I've always felt like education and imparting knowledge was my passion . . . purpose . . . and it was something I was supposed to do. This is my sphere of excellence (Interview 3, June 11, 2020).

Ayana described her existing leadership position as the best opportunity she has had that aligns with her educational achievements, personal interests, and continued scholarly endeavors. She said it was “like God knew that I would need those experiences in order to help me to be the type of leader that I need to be, in this space, at this time” (Interview 4, June 12, 2020).

Jessica offered her personal reasons for remaining in her role: “because I feel that I’m making a difference. And I also feel that there’s still a lot more to be done. That’s, that’s one thing that has always guided me in everything that I’ve done” (Interview 5, June 14, 2020).

Cynthia visibly fought back tears when responding to the question about why she stayed in her leadership role.

So, I don’t want to get emotional on this, but I stay in this work because there’s been so long we [Black people] have not been included at all. I stay in this work because I see, I see the differences in Syracuse, New York. I can’t talk about anything outside of Syracuse, but I see the differences in all of the work that I do. (Interview 6, June 18, 2020)

When Tatiana was asked about why she stayed in her current leadership role, she replied: My child. I mean, literally, everything I do is for my child . . . and to me . . . I don’t feel like the people ahead of us took care of, or were good stewards in many
ways, for us. So, I feel like it’s important for us to be good stewards for them.

(Interview 7, June 17, 2020)

Tamar was noticeably excited to respond to the inquiry about why she remained in her existing leadership roles in two different job sectors, sharing that she had become more and more clear about defining her purpose. She highlighted three distinct parts of who she is and why she felt passionate about remaining in the work. “I am a healer, catalyst, and that I’m . . . there’s really just an activist in me” (Interview 8, June 19, 2020).

Keturah shared her reasons for continuing in her existing leadership capacity, but she also eluded to succession planning, as she looked forward to transitioning out of her senior leadership role:

While there’s immediate gratification for providing apartment assistance to people who are homeless or helping people get a job, the sustainability of that service provision absolutely has to be addressed from the administrative level in order to ensure that those services can continue to happen, to be able to affect systems, and particularly to be able to affect them from a perspective of a Black woman. And that’s what I’ve been doing now for half of my career. And that’s hard sometimes. Like, you know, you begin to get a little bit of a separation from the ground, but that’s why we prepare the ground and move on. So, the next generation can be on the ground, and we have some really dynamic, energetic, young people in our community that are on the ground. (Interview 9, June 25, 2020)
**Analysis.** The self-awareness of each candidate included in the study, along with the psychological resources of self-regulation and self-efficacy demonstrated alignment with the coping factor of self from Schlossberg’s (1987) 4-S model. It became evident during the data collection process that engaging in constant self-regulation by the participants was fueled by their desire to be perceived as competent by their peers. Expressing emotion or showing vulnerability was repeatedly identified as an undesirable trait during the interviews. Suppressing emotion was consistently regarded as strength by the majority of the interviewees, which was often followed by self-disclosure of the negative health implications resulting from that suppression.

Self-efficacy as a personal resource for garnering support for their leadership development was the direct result of the self-awareness the participants expressed. Self-awareness allowed the women to identify their personal opportunities for growth. Their internal desire to bridge their self-identified gaps, presented as self-efficacy, to tap into internal and external resources to support their leadership development.

**Research Question 2.** *What are the perceptions of African American female leaders on the dynamics that influence their health and wellness in their work environment?*

Table 4.4

*Research question 2 alignment with theoretical framework and interview questions*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Question</th>
<th>Theory</th>
<th>Interview Question</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Situation</td>
<td>5. What do health, wellness, and well-being mean to you? 6. If at all, how do you see your health, wellness, and well-being affected by your leadership responsibilities and/or your work environment?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Relationship to theoretical framework.** Research Question 2 assessed the characteristics of situations (one element of Schlossberg’s 4-S model) that arose in the lived experiences of Black female executives in their work environments and their perception of the impact on their overall well-being.

According to Schlossberg (1984), assessing a situation consists of several components that must be considered when taking stock of resources to navigate transitions. The components include:

- **Trigger** – what caused the transition?
- **Timing** – social view, is it on time or not? Good or bad?
- **Control/source** – what aspects can the individual control? Transition itself or reaction?
- **Role change** – has the role changed? Is it good/gain or bad/loss?
- **Duration** – permanent, temp, or unknown
- **Previous experience** – able to cope before
- **Concurrent stress** – other stressors?

The situation being assessed was the existing work environment for the Black women in senior leadership. For some of the participants, the situation could have been characterized as an event or a nonevent, as the women moved in, moved through, and moved out of their leadership roles. The components that can impact the perception of a situation are aligned in Table 4.5.
Table 4.5

Assessment of the Components of a Situation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Component</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
<th>Assessment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Concurrent Stress</td>
<td>Other stressors</td>
<td>Family health, furloughs, lay-offs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control</td>
<td>Aspects under individual’s control – situation or reaction</td>
<td>Cannot control social distancing or remote work, only personal reaction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Duration</td>
<td>Permanent/temporary/unknown</td>
<td>No known end to COVID-19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Previous Experience</td>
<td>Ability to reference coping with similar past experience</td>
<td>No reference for level and duration in this generation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role Change</td>
<td>Degree of change, good/gain, bad/loss</td>
<td>Remote work/distance learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trigger</td>
<td>Cause of situation</td>
<td>COVID-19 Pandemic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Timing</td>
<td>Social view of good or bad timing</td>
<td>No good time for a pandemic</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Findings.** Imbalance, as a superordinate theme, was derived from the four cycles of coding for Research Question 2. Subordinate themes of work/life balance and system navigation were identified through the coding process as well. The work environment was a prominent space that the participants perceived as being imbalanced during the data collection process. The stress of simply identifying as a Black woman was noted across interviews. Marie shared her thoughts about Black women’s regulatory process of managing stress, which she described as being imbalanced and different than other demographics of people:

Black women have a very different regulatory process. So, normally, when you’re stressed, your brain sends signals to release, you know, the adrenaline. So, it’s a fight or flight. You could decide if it’s a fight or flight situation, and your body regulates itself accordingly. But when your body is . . . and your mind . . . is constantly under stress related to either work or everyday microaggressions or racial events or just overall trauma, like, your body never really gets a chance to
stabilize and to really get to a state of rest. And I think about that, and I think about myself and those processes. Those constant processes break down your immune system. It causes a whole lot of inflammatory issues that then will lead to other issues. If it’s not treated, so, when you, when I sit down and I think about, “wow, the stress that I am . . . that we, as Black women, are under on a daily basis” . . . Inadvertently or not, it . . . it’s affecting us, it is affecting our health, it is affecting our well-being, it is affecting the way we see ourselves, and that level of constant stress is not healthy. (Interview 1, June 9, 2020)

Tamar offered her personal lived experiences with imbalance, and the consequence of the self-sacrificing behavior in the following passage:

I didn’t take care of my physical health, because I was taught my physical health wasn’t as important as my family’s physical health; or the physical health of everyone else’s. But when my body started to break down . . . when my body started to burn out . . . I actually realized I was destroying my own body. (Tamar, Interview 8, June 19, 2020)

**Work/life balance.** Imbalance between work and life outside of work was prominent across interviews, throughout the various cycles of coding for Research Question 2. Each participant referenced some sort of adjustment to their work environment as it pertains to the COVID-19 pandemic. Moving through their leadership responsibilities while learning to adapt to remote engagement with colleagues, clients, constituents, students, and patients was described as “disorienting” by Marie.
Two of the women in the study identified strategies they implemented to prioritize balanced lives, even during the pandemic. Their approach to that prioritization varied. Esther and Frances were clear about the boundaries they established to maintain balance.

I recently had a situation where I was troubled, and my wellness state wasn’t where it typically would be. It was the pressures of the consulting company, the pressures of the new company, the pressures of being home all day with everyone, the pressures of trying to balance my house . . . everything; and I, I had to take a step back and realize . . . what is it that I need to do right now to be well? And I had to put things in place to be well. And whether that means getting a nutritional coach, hiring a chef, connecting with my mentor, reaching out to a therapist, going for three to five mile walks every day; whatever I needed to do. I need to put those things in place, because there is a certain amount of balance that is required for me to do what I need to do. And this is a part of the process. (Esther, Interview 3, June 11, 2020)

Frances spoke about how she had to constantly shift gears between leadership roles, often several times throughout her workday. That experience was common for 78% of the participants in this study.

Especially during the last few months, I’ve been very particular. I look at my calendar on a Sunday and say, “Okay, let me look at my full week.” See what it looks like and make sure that I, you know, have to fit in my work out first thing in the morning, make sure I have time to cook my meals or do what I need to do. So, balance is key and finding time for the things that I need to do. And setting some boundaries around, around the day because you could easily work from morning
to night, and you really have to be the one to say, “okay I’m setting some, I’m creating my schedule, creating the life that I need to live that will allow me to be well and to do what I need to do.” (Interview 2, June 9, 2020)

When the discussion of work/life balance was brought up with Marie, she struggled to find words. The pauses she took as she tried to describe the imbalance indicated a hesitation to verbalize the pressure she felt to live up to the expectations from those at work and in her home. The sudden impact of working remotely, as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, had an even more disorienting impact on Marie’s sense of imbalance. She described the imbalance as a seesaw.

Um, it’s a constant struggle of, you know, I might be happy at home, but I’m miserable at work or vice versa. Um, you know with this whole COVID pandemic lockdown. Um, I’ve been. I’ve kind of gotten what I asked for. I, I’m doing the work that I enjoy, albeit it remotely, but I don’t have to deal with my crazy coworkers. Because at home, you know, I don’t have to deal with the politics or the gossip of the office because I’m home and I’m still able to do the work that I enjoy. Um, but on the flip side . . . families . . . and I love them, but being in a confined space, 24 hours a day, since March 16, that’s not helping my well-being. Um, so it’s always . . . it . . . I feel like when one is up, one is always down. There’s like a seesaw effect going on. (Interview 1, June 9, 2020)

When asked if she thought work/life balance was a realistic goal, Keturah answered by asking a series of rhetorical questions and giving herself time to think about the answers:
Our lives are comprised of our families, our work, and then whatever time is left for whatever we choose to occupy that space. And why shouldn’t all those spaces equally allow us the ability to be empowered, to make change? There may be. There may be Black women who are in an empowered position at work, and very much not in that position at home or vice versa. And why do we have to give up any of it? (Interview 9, June 25, 2020)

System navigation. Navigating systems at work arose from the data, under the superordinate theme of imbalance, as the women spoke of hierarchical structures, gossip, and workplace politics. Keturah, Tatiana, and Marie spoke about the obstacles of getting to a desired outcome, even in their leadership role. The women felt strongly that they had to justify asking for what they need, asking for a promotion, or asking for support to complete tasks, in a way that White women did not have to.

Keturah spoke about what things would look like if she had what she needed at work to do her job. She suggested that getting what she needed was unrealistic because of skewed organizational structures, work politics, and a few other reasons described in the following passage:

I could make a decision, and I wouldn’t have to get agreement or buy in from anybody, that’s unrealistic. That is the difficulty of all of this . . . I can influence a lot of decisions, but there are layers, oh my God, of decisions and regulations, particularly in my sector. The complexity of stuff you gotta go through to get something done. And within those layers, people looking in your face saying, they understand, or they agree because you’re a boss. But in their hearts could give a damn who you are, or your position. Now is that because I’m a woman? Is that
because I’m Black, or is that because I’m both, or they just don’t like authority? (Interview 9, June 25, 2020)

Tatiana mentioned the hierarchy among colleagues and peers, resulting in unhealthy competitions and invisible structures, impeding progress toward a desired outcome:

So, I think trying to incorporate something that really isn’t there, because we’re all equal. Even though we’re not. And I know that doesn’t make sense because there’s a lot of seniority involved in my field, which is total bullshit, because we all have the same responsibility. (Tatiana, Interview 7, June 17, 2020)

Marie mentioned workplace politics and hierarchies as systems that created obstacles for her in her leadership role. She also introduced a system that none of the other women mentioned, navigating the gatekeepers.

I think, for me, ideally, what would help with my leadership responsibility is having the autonomy to be able to do what I want to do. Like, right now, I still have to report to a supervisor. I still have to almost ask permission for some of the things that I want to do. Feel like I am, even, even though I’m in a leadership position, there are still strings attached. There are still things that are being asked of me that I don’t necessarily agree with, but I feel I have to do because my, um, the person above me, said to do it, whether or not I agree with it or I think it’s the wrong decision. I still have to do it. And those are the aspects that I feel . . . I don’t feel good about.

Um, so I feel like in terms of my leadership skills, I’ve literally had to navigate when to speak up, how to speak up, who to speak to, and the other thing
I’ve learned in my leadership realm is. . . . Sometimes you need, sometimes you can’t be the one, depending on who the messenger is, to deliver a message. You need to pick that person. So, I quickly learned that if I need something to get to my higher up, I can’t go ask blah blah blah person because they don’t have a good relationship. So, I’m never going to get what I need. But if I go ask Susie Q, who is really good friends with the person, I have a better shot. So, it’s the politics. It’s the bureaucracies that I don’t like. But it’s a part of my job and I have to, I had to learn how to navigate that. (Interview 1, June 9, 2020)

Frances added an aspect of workplace politics and hierarchy in a way that was not mentioned by any of the other participants. She spoke about the systems in place that allow others to assess the value of the leader.

I think Black leaders, especially what I have witnessed, often get, um . . . You see how much institutions really value those leaders based on their portfolio, their budgets, how many people report to them, you know, all those different things. How much really shows you how institutions really value them. (Interview 2, June 9, 2020)

Shared experiences relating to systems of discrimination were evident among the participants based on the intersectionality of their race and gender. Frances explained how discrimination manifested itself in her industry.

Most institutions have maybe five good people that really make all the decisions. Of those five people, do you have Black women? do you have . . . You know, most don’t. They keep us at a certain level. Sometimes it’s window dressing. It
doesn’t mean that we shouldn’t aspire and continue to work to become . . . but we also have to know.

Um . . . I don’t want to be used for show, and I think sometimes people will use Black women as the Mammy or the help, um, you know, there’s different tropes. But I think, in my industry anyway, you see that a lot.

There’s so many Black women who have opened doors, who, you know, have moved into those spaces where they are the only one, so that they can begin to shift culture and shift organizations and, so, knowing that people are going to see them as the help or see them as . . . and really coming in dynamic ways, resisting and pushing back against that. (Interview 2, June 9, 2020)

Keturah spoke about her exhaustion from the discrimination she felt when she experienced resistance from others to accept her as a Black woman with a level of authority.

I can’t presume, but I suspect. that as a White male authority, any rebellion to that authority is based on just rebellion to authority. When you bring yourself in the mix as a Black woman . . . Now, I got to say, is it authority? Is it a woman? Is it Black? Is it my age? If you know, even in my thirties and forties coming up. Why, I gotta, you know, I’ve got to think through all of those scenarios to get to the crux of what the matter is? Is it, you don’t like the policy or the procedure or the change? Is it you don’t like it’s coming from a woman? Is it that you don’t like it coming from a Black person? Is it that you don’t like it coming from a Black woman? Is it that I speak a different language than you do? What is it? I mean, that layer of complexity has to be added onto so many, so many decisions or
positions or methodologies. Instead of just saying, why can’t it just be because it is? Because it can’t. Because our country was founded on those biases based on sex and age and race and ethnicity. 'Wears you out. (Interview 9, June 25, 2020)

Marie’s experiences with discrimination left her feeling guarded and untrusting of White colleagues within her organization. Admittedly, being guarded can create a tense work environment, which, in turn, could have become a barrier to her leadership development.

I don’t think I actively seek out mentorship. Or support. A colleague and I, which we are the only two Black females in our office, we share that sentiment a lot because, again, within the institution, which is a predominantly White institution, we don’t know who to trust. We don’t know who has our backs. We don’t know who is for us or a snake in the grass. So, for me, I tend to just reach outside the institution for the support and the help that I need. (Interview 1, June 9, 2020)

Tamar compared assimilating to performing, stating “I’ll make that really concrete. Assimilating into White, dominant culture requires performance. And so, you wear yourself out, performing everywhere.”

Analysis. Imbalance in the workplace and home life, coupled with the Black participants feeling like they had to navigate systems in a different way than their White colleagues were noticeable themes. The COVID-19 pandemic heightened the perception of the impact work had on the health, wellness, and well-being of the women in this study. The isolating effect of social distancing, on top of the sudden overlapping remote work and school environments, manifested in a disruption of the prioritization of self-care. While two of the participants continued to prioritize self-care and mitigate the
impact of work on their sense of health, wellness, and well-being, they joined the seven other participants in acknowledging the disorienting impact of the pandemic.

**Research Question 3.** *In what ways do African American female executives describe their support networks?*

Table 4.6

*Research question 3 alignment with theoretical framework and interview questions*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Question</th>
<th>Theory</th>
<th>Interview Question</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Support</td>
<td>7. What structures are in place for you as an African American female executive that serve to provide support to you?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>8. What structures do you think should be in place for Black women in leadership within a predominantly White institution?</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**Relationship to the theoretical framework.** Support, as a coping factor, was identified by Schlossberg (1984) in her 4-S model of coping. Support addresses the degree to which individuals’ perceived level of organizational support influences their ability to cope (Schlossberg, 1984). The participants were asked two questions during the interview regarding support. In IQ 7, they were each asked about the existing structures in place within their organizations for support. IQ 8 posed an inquiry about what the participants felt should be in place to offer support for Black women in leadership. Safe spaces arose from the data as the superordinate theme for Research Question 3. Uninvited and circle of trust were identified as the two subordinate themes through the four rounds of coding.

**Findings.** The creation of safe spaces for Black women to feel supported and to develop as leaders was a salient theme across job sectors. The identified organizational
supports were deemed inadequate, as they were not perceived as serving to specifically support them as Black women in leadership. More than once, the participants named the counseling support through their organization. The Employee Assistance Program (EAP), which serves to provide a limited number of free counseling and support services to employees, seemed to be a resource across all sectors. Two participants from academia mentioned having access to a formal round-table structure for support. The participants in education and government expressed an informal and very individualized system of communication with other leaders as support.

*Uninvited.* When Tatiana was asked about support services at her disposal, she reported feeling as though the supports were not necessarily created for her.

Well, there are for, like, regular … employees, but I would say it’s not necessarily available for [someone in my role]. I mean, I suppose if I wanted to call, like, an EAP, probably I could do it. I guess I feel like that’s not for me. It’s for the employees. (Interview 7, June 17, 2020)

Keturah identified the same organizational offering of EAP support, but also did not consider it adequate, stating “We have our help people, which is our Employee Assistance Program. I have never used it. Don’t have the time. (Interview 9, June 25, 2020)

Marie described dialogue forums and committees in her organization, created to construct innovative wellness programs and activities. Marie expressed feeling uninvited, like those spaces were not created for her, as a Black female leader.

My opinion, a lot of those programs are more tailored to the majority White population. So, the yoga and meditation and . . . Monday mile walk around the
block. It’s hot! I’m not doing that. I’m, you know, I’m not going to do yoga at the office because, you know, while other people might feel very comfortable being sweaty and then going to the gym and showering or going to the, you know, we have locker rooms and stuff. I don’t feel comfortable in that. And so, to me, there aren’t really strategies that are specific to, institutional strategies that are specific to, African American professionals within the organization. (Interview 1, June 9, 2020)

Overall, the data show that the participants did not feel the structures within their organizations served to support them specifically as Black women in leadership, leaving them feeling uninvited to participate. As a result, creating a circle of trust to foster an environment of support and leadership development arose as a subordinate theme.

*Circle of trust.* When Esther was asked about if safe spaces needed to be created for other populations of people who are not Black or allies, she responded by stating:

I think when you walk into most settings. I’ll speak for, from my own perspective. When I walk into a setting. I am always, typically, the only one in the room who’s Black. I’m a Black woman, at that. And, so, to create these spaces for other people, I don’t think it’s necessary. This space was purposely created for those people. There aren’t many spaces that are specifically created for women of color, other than Historically Black Colleges and Universities. Those are the only spaces that are created for us. Solely, everything they do is to comfort, console, bring in people who look like me. Otherwise, there are no spaces created like that, other than people who are deciding to create businesses and they want to make sure there is adequate representation. But otherwise, I don’t think those spaces exist.
And, so, for someone to say, “Oh my gosh, you have a space?” I should have a space . . . this whole world belongs to you. (Interview 3, June 11, 2020)

Tamar explained her perception of organizational structures of support and the impact on retention of Black women leaders.

There’s also this hierarchical classist thinking that when you get to a certain level, then you’re worthy of the extra support. As opposed to that support being built in inherently in the structure and in the system. Because it’s inherently built in for White folks. And they’re so entitled to it they don’t know that they’re not getting it, or if they’re getting it. Do you know what I mean? So, to me, the business and the organization has the responsibility to build that in from the get go, and the business and the organization has a responsibility to be very clear where their culture is and their ability to retain and grow staff of color, because if you don’t have a really good handle . . . If you are in disillusionment about that, it doesn’t matter what you build, you can’t keep us. (Interview 8, June 19, 2020)

The participants were asked about what structures they feel should be in place within their organizations to support them as Black women leaders. The responses all pertained to the desire to have a safe space. Esther gave an example of what it is like to seek out a safe space in her current environment.

It’s funny, because, if I go into a building, and there is another African American woman, you know, we always make that signal. “Like, I see you.” And then it’s like, “okay, I’m going to talk to you.” And so, whether that means we have to go outside to have an authentic conversation, or we have to like go into a corner somewhere to have this conversation. We shouldn’t have to move to have
authentic conversations. And I think that Black women need our spaces to have these conversations that we want to have, whether it be with ourselves or someone else who has decided that they are a not just an ally, but a co-conspirator or an accomplice. Someone who’s willing to have those conversations, but I also believe that there are spaces that need to be created for solace. That means that I just want to sit here, and all of this, without explaining my need to sit. I want to be able to do that. And that doesn’t necessarily have to be my car. (Interview 3, June 11, 2020)

Jessica emphasized the importance of networking with other leaders of color to decrease feelings of isolation. She also mentioned a need to establish interdisciplinary connections outside the organization for support.

It’s important to have, I think that we should have, a network of like minds of leaders in different positions. Leaders with different organizations, and network with them. It’s, I really feel that, that way you don’t feel as if you’re isolated. So, that would be something that would be very important that I, I would like to be in a position to provide that for other people coming up, but also I think that we should, we should have that in place within our organizations. We really should, because I hate to say this, but they’re not too many of us. And it definitely helps you feel that you’re not the only one, you’re not the only one to have gone through this. But there’s also some support from other people. (Interview 5, June 14, 2020)

Similar to Jessica, Ayana felt strongly about building networks among Black women leaders.
I think that it’s important that Black women in leadership, that we know each other, you know. That we have a space for dialogue, for just coming together. It doesn’t have to be always work related, but I believe it’s important for us to know each other, not only because of, you know, the benefits of or through association, but then also so that we can share resources and then really have an understanding of how our work intersects with each other; or, you know, building community in general. So, normally in institutions, that comes in the form of affinity groups. Um, if there is one, I’ve yet to hear of one that is, that really tries to bring together Black women in administrative leadership. And so oftentimes, there could be something on the faculty end, but it’s still not specific to Black women.

(Interview 4, June 12, 2020)

Ayana was also clear about how financial resources, specifically allocated for the leadership development of Black women, would be a beneficial policy change for the overall organization.

I think that we need resources that specifically can be used for our professional development. I believe that, you know, executive-level coaching should be provided so that it, it creates a pipeline for not only leadership and Black women in executive leadership, but then also, how we can have a strategic plan to advanced down where we’re at. And that helps with building diversity and inclusion within the overall institution at large. So that, you know, it’s nice to talk. That’s cool, “kiki,” and that sort of thing. Tea and crumpets, you know, all that’s great. But when we start to talk about how we can effectively impact the landscape of the institution, now we’re talking about certain policies/procedures.
Now we’re talking about lending or giving resources to that. What is the training? If I’m looking for a mentor, it shouldn’t be hard to find. What is the programming and the money to support that? Then, that will make sure that Ayana is paired with some sort of mentor that’s going to help her. Not only to sustain the work that she’s doing but to, to advance, in general. Because when I grow and I advance, so does the organization that I’m leading. And then, when you’re really committed to the work and really committed to that growth, then you’ll not only just invest in the organization, but you’ll invest in the leadership. (Interview 4, June 12, 2020)

Like Ayana, at the time of this study, Frances was a leader in the education sector. Frances verbalized her frustration with always having to either name the structures that need to be in place for Black women leaders to feel supported or to create it herself. She also stated that hiring and succession planning that prioritizes diversity should be in place to create a culture of support.

It’s frustrating because, you know, we have to be the ones to name what the structure should be and demand and ask, because they’re not going to figure it out on their own. We need to have multiple representation, more leaders across . . . I mean, I think once we begin to see some of that, representation is everything. . . . It’s a minimal start. I just feel like on a bare minimum, you should be able to look at your hiring practices, or your promotion practices and say, “okay, look. This has to change.” But even that, when you look at the pipelines, there’s just no people coming behind. So, how do you begin to cultivate that? So, maybe
something to formally begin to cultivate leadership, could be useful. (Interview 2, June 9, 2020)

Frances continued by adding her perception of inequitable and unjust ways that people get promoted to leadership positions.

I also think the ways that people get promoted into leadership and tapped into leadership positions is very different for us as Black women than it is for, say, White men. . . . Very different process. People have to start looking around the table and say “this isn’t acceptable. This isn’t acceptable.” And until that happens, we gonna see the same thing. So, you can put out statements, you can do all these kind of performative things, but until you start to put some real teeth behind these things, it’s the same old, same old. Business as usual. (Interview 2, June 9, 2020)

Tamar remarked about how structures that are implemented to serve as supports need to be defined by those who need it, as opposed to what those in power believe should be in place, in order to dismantle oppressive systems. Tamar’s response could be viewed as a bit of a contrast to the frustrations expressed by Frances around having to always name what is needed. However, the creation of safe spaces was still the most prevalent outcome among the respondents.

Informal touch points, building a network of support and, and defining what that support means. And then actively giving them a voice. Because the internal lines of oppression and racism are so significant. I don’t care how bright, I don’t care how connected. There has to be access and a channel for that voice to be understood, recognized, and given place for. There’s got to be a holding space for that voice, and that experience. (Interview 8, June 19, 2020)
The participants in this study conveyed the importance of having a safe space in their organization to feel supported and to contribute to their development as leaders. It was mentioned on more than one occasion that the structures in place are held for White colleagues, and they do not feel inviting for Black women in leadership. The feeling of being uninvited or left out often leads Black women to leave an unsupportive work environment or to seek support for themselves.

**Analysis.** Safe spaces for support and development as Black women leaders was paramount throughout the coding process for Research Question 3. Participation in organizational resources for support were met with resistance by the participants because of their role as a leader and/or their identity as a Black woman. As a result, the women expressed a desire to establish circles of trust, allowing them to foster a community of support as leaders and Black women.

**Research Question 4.** *What strategies do African American female executive leaders employ to ensure their well-being?*

Table 4.7

*Research question 4 alignment with theoretical framework and interview questions*

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Question</th>
<th>Theory</th>
<th>Interview Question</th>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Strategy</td>
<td>7. What are some strategies you employ to address, maintain your health and wellness?</td>
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<td>8. (a) Are you familiar with the strong Black woman schema (SBW)?</td>
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<td>(b) If so, do you or have you ever ascribed to SBW &amp; what are the positive and negative implications?</td>
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<td>9. If at all, how important is it to have a mentor?</td>
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<td>10. If anything, what have you had to sacrifice in pursuit of leadership?</td>
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<td>11. Is there anything else you would like to share?</td>
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**Relationship to the theoretical framework.** Strategies was the fourth factor identified in Schlossberg’s (1984) 4-S model. Strategies refers to the coping response of the individual that allows that person to either modify the situation, control their internal meaning of the problem, and/or aid in managing the stress in the aftermath of the situation (Schlossberg, 1984).

**Findings.** When participants were asked to identify strategies they employed to address their well-being in IQ 9, overwhelmingly, participants identified inner strength as a way of coping. Although strength is identified as the superordinate theme, associated with some positive implications, ultimately, eight of the nine participants viewed strength as a sort of prison. Tamar firmly stated at the conclusion of her interview, “Strength is a prison. Don’t let it be” (Interview 8, June 19, 2020). Subordinate themes of sacrifice and prioritization of self-care also emerged during the coding process.

While discussing strategies for well-being from IQ 9, the nine participants identified inner strength as their core resource for well-being. With strength arising as the superordinate theme, it seemed fitting to ask directly, in IQ 10(a), if the participants had ever heard of the strong Black woman complex (SBW) (Watson & Hunter, 2016), also known as the Superwoman syndrome (Woods-Giscombé, 2010). All nine participants acknowledged familiarity with both terms. A follow-up question asked if the women had ever personally ascribed to the persona of the SBW or Superwoman. All nine participants responded that they had at some point in their career. Keturah boldly stated, “Yeah, I use it when I need to advocate on behalf of people all the time” (Interview 9, June 25, 2020)
When Ayana was asked about her familiarity with the SBW complex, her response was, “I’m a victim of it, yes” (Interview 4, June 12, 2020). Marie initially viewed ascribing to the SBW complex in a positive way, stating,

I think it’s, it’s almost like a badge of honor. You know, like, “yeah, I’m a strong Black woman. I can get through this. I can get through anything” and it gives you that, that extra gas in your tank to just keep going when you just don’t want to go. (Interview 1, June 9, 2020)

While many of the participants who viewed being an SBW as a positive part of their identity, Jessica felt that being strong should be enough, without adding, what she viewed as, the tokenized component of being Black.

I’d rather see myself as a strong woman. I think that we do ourselves a disservice by painting that picture that we’re Black AND we’re strong. We’re strong. We shouldn’t put a color to it . . . We shouldn’t have to add that. Some people might even see it as, “oh, she feels entitled, she was taken as a token Black woman, and that’s why she’s in this position.” You can’t go back, we can’t, we can’t let that cloud lead us. We need to see ourselves as being strong and deserving [of] the position and being able to, and knowing that we can, we can perform this leadership role. We don’t need to make people further discount. Nobody says, “oh, he’s a strong White man.” Nobody would ever say that. So, strength is from within and let’s all—just claim ourselves as being strong. (Interview 5, June 14, 2020)

While strength was consistently viewed as a positive implication, the participants were asked what they perceived as negative implications of being strong.
Sacrifice. Throughout the data collection process, all participants identified the sacrifices and impact on their well-being from consistently identifying as strong, while in pursuit of leadership. The sacrifices included self, health, peace, family, and time. Jessica stated with exasperation, “I’ve sacrificed myself” (Interview 5, June 14, 2020). Marie talked about her own self-sacrifice as the downside of always identifying as strong.

It comes at a detriment. It comes at deteriorating health, you know, it comes at, you know, having to constantly, like, never really, or very seldomly, getting to just be yourself and disconnect, because you feel like you’re always having to take care of somebody else. Either it’s family, or spouses, or friends, or your community. You’re just always on. So, unless you purposefully turn off that switch, it doesn’t happen. So that’s, that to me, is the downside. (Interview 1, June 9, 2020)

Tamar had a moment of deep reflection when talking about the prison she felt she was in while identifying as strong and a superwoman. She alluded to the negative impact constantly identifying as strong had on her health, recalling a time when she had engaged in self-sacrificing behaviors for so long, that she had forgotten to eat. As a result, she nearly lost consciousness from low blood sugar.

I grew up watching The Cosbys, and Claire Huxtable was who I wanted to be. So, I was like, I can have a job. I can raise my kids. I want to be in the boardroom. And I want to have it all. I bought that so fully lock, stock, and barrel. Then it about killed me. Because I couldn't be strong, all the time. I couldn't! In fact, in fact, let me tell you how ingrained this was, that if I couldn’t live up to that I was a failure to my family and my community. So, if that’s the case, I had to keep that
identity going as long as possible. So, when I told you the story about me having my blood sugar tanking. Um, that was really the breaking point. When I had to lay down the cape, take off the shirt, put the boots away, and say, “I’m not well, I’m not physically well, I’m not spiritually well, I’m not mentally well, I’m, I’m not emotionally well, like, different . . . that point, even if I show you, I have a picture of myself. I was all kinds of . . . my body was internally toxic. I was a mess. I could get dressed and put on the shoes, the earrings, show up. I’m articulate. I’ll tell you what you want, but at the end of the day, I was so sick. So, so not well, and that’s when I burned out, and I mean it. I didn’t even, I didn’t even take a job. I just stopped everything; in fact, I was unemployed for 18 months. (Interview 8, June 19, 2020)

Keturah described sacrificing her family while pursuing leadership roles. When asked directly, if anything, what was sacrificed, she responded, “My family.” She went on to explain in further detail.

We have a strong family but, I’ll give you some examples. Oh my God. Um, when I was offered this job, I went to my husband and said “I’ve been offered this job, you know what this means? It’s nonstop. Phone never stops ringing emails, people.” He said, “I get it, but you got to do it.” Um, throughout my career, I’ve left my family to go help a family. Um, yeah, it hit me really hard one time when my son was graduating from, um, middle school, he was headed to high school, and we went to the graduation, and when he started middle school, I had started in my previous leadership role. And when he finished middle school, I realized that, pretty much ,other than the teacher conferences . . . I’m always good at, like, the
technical stuff you’re supposed to do as a parent. Meetings, all that kind of stuff. I’m good at that, but I realized I had missed HIM and his growth during middle school completely. I can’t let that happen anymore. (Interview 9, June 25, 2020)

Tatiana stated clearly that she had sacrificed time that she will never get back, while pursuing her career in leadership.

Time... You never get it back. Never get time back.

I don’t want to say that I’ve missed, like, a lot of life moments because I always was very purposeful with my son to make sure that I was always at everything that he was doing, always. Even if that meant inconveniencing myself from like driving back and forth to somewhere or driving to do something and in someplace that was, probably not right because I could have said to my husband, “Can you do this?” instead of me doing it. But I always, I never wanted my son to feel like I wasn’t there for him and not supporting him in his activities, because obviously, that was like how I grew up, and I didn’t want that to be his experience. But I definitely feel like you have to be able to have strength in your relationships because it’s time. It’s like you’re sacrificing time, you don’t get back those 2 hours that you give up at night working, when you could, maybe, be sitting on the couch, having time doing stupid shit with your husband. (Interview 7, June 17, 2020)

Since it was clear that sacrifices were made in pursuit of leadership, the participants were asked about their personal strategies and systems of support for well-being.
Prioritization of self-care. Five of the nine participants described their support system as a circle of sisters or a tribe of women. Other women included their husbands and families when they spoke of their support structures. Seven of the participants identified that they were left to create safe and supportive spaces for themselves, often outside of their organization, in order to prioritize their self-care.

Tatiana talked about the importance of unplugging and being present as a strategy for well-being.

I think the most important thing relative to leadership, and life, and wellness, probably, even if you’re not drinking all the water, and doing all the exercise, and all of those things that you are supposed to be. The things is being able to be present. So, if I’m with you. I’m with you right now. So, if I’m watching TV. I’m watching TV with you right now, and it’s very hard to detach when work sucks you in all the time, and I can’t say that I’m great being present all the time, but I think, because you’re giving up so much, as far as, like, time and your body and your life, that it is important for the relationships you have and for yourself to be present. So, when I’m with my son, I’m with my son. I’m not talking on the phone. I’m not looking at text. Like, when I’m with my husband, I can, for 20 minutes in between commercial breaks, sit here and not have to . . . [taps at phone screen].

It is very difficult because we’re tethered. It’s a chain. It’s another one of those chains that we need to break. I talk about not being able to live without chains. I am really in that space right now, that we all live with. Chains. Black, White, whatever. We’re all living with chains. And it’s hard to not live with them.
And I think breaking the chain of bondage to technology. Makes us not be present when we need to be. (Interview 7, June 17, 2020)

Tamar was able to articulate what it looked like for her to create boundaries in her relationships at work to ensure her sense of well-being.

Well, I don’t, I don’t hold on to stuff anymore. I don’t, I don’t own labor that’s not mine. So, I became very skillful in going to my White colleagues, peers, and leaders, and bringing back to them the parts that they own, and I became very good at knowing what parts I have to own. I also recognize being a Black woman, um, my endurance and capacity is different than theirs, and they will take advantage of that, if I let them. And so, I have really good boundaries. (Interview 8, June 19, 2020)

Marie struggled with identifying strategies for well-being in light of the pandemic and having to conduct work and school responsibilities from home, along with parenting and assisting her children with their remote school environment. However, she was able to recall strategies that she looks forward to returning to as social distancing guidelines are lifted.

Prior to the pandemic, I’ve tried to actually practice self-care and, at least once a month . . . It’s been a little difficult with school and everything else, but in the past, at least once a month, I would take a day off. I would take a mental health day. And it was, it was scheduled. It was on the books. Don’t call me, don’t bother me. I’m disconnecting and that was helpful. Both to just disconnect from work, to disconnect. I would literally have, you know, disconnect from Facebook, social media. Like it was a complete shutdown. Because that allowed me to
recharge. That allowed me to just shut up, just shut off for a minute. Um, and the other thing I used to do. Again, school has taken up a lot of, a lot of my self-care strategies, was just connecting with friends. Connecting with friends and family. Again, being able to find strategies that refueled me. So, making those connections was like I’m tapping somebody and they’re giving me their energy.

Counseling, I’ve done therapy sessions with a professional counselor, which are also helpful just to be able to talk, and it was a person of color who was my therapist, which I love. So, um, yeah, but every day is different, like every month is different, every . . . what worked before, sometimes, now isn’t working. Like, I can’t take a mental health day because there’s no, there’s no disconnecting. (Interview 1, June 9, 2020)

Esther shared her strategies for well-being through ritualistic practices that helped keep her centered.

I can tell you that I meditate. I have to do breathing practices every day because what I find is when my stress level goes up, my breathing stops, and so I spent a lot of time holding my breath or clenching my jaw, and I have breathing that I have to do, techniques . . . I walk three to five miles a day. I do stretching, I prep every meal, like eat from scratch. I don't eat processed foods. I stopped eating meat. I don’t eat dairy. My goal was to create the best possible environment in here (pointing to her body). I say the perfect environment, but perfection doesn’t exist, but I wanted to create the best environment in here so I can operate out there. And I do everything possible to make sure my health and wellness are prioritized. I see an integrative health specialist to make sure I'm not deficient in
vitamins, minerals, anything, because I, I’ve always said, I’m going to live to 107, and if I’m going to live to 107, I got to take care of this body. And so, I, I commit to doing those things. (Interview 3, June 11, 2020)

**Analysis.** Strength was viewed as having both positive and negative implications. Identifying as strong gave the participants a sense of accomplishment and served as a coping mechanism to navigate the systems of oppression associated with their intersecting identities of being both Black and female. Conversely, those same coping strategies were described as self-deprecating in nature, causing the women to sacrifice their sense of self, their health, time, family, and peace. For those with a clear sense of boundaries and identified strategies to for promotion of overall well-being reported that prioritization of self-care was key.

**Summary of Results**

This chapter provided an overview of the diverse experiences of the women participants engaged in this study relating to their role as Black women in leadership. The chapter revealed the findings derived from the collected data, four cycles of coding, and the interpretative phenomenological analysis process. The four cycles of coding included a priori, in vivo, descriptive, and values coding.

Responses from the nine participants yielded four themes, each with two subordinate themes, aligned with the 4-S model of Schlossberg’s (1987) transition theory and the four research questions. The four superordinate themes and corresponding subordinate themes that emerged were the following:

- Self-awareness
  - Self-regulation
The purpose of this study was to explore the phenomenon of Black female executives holding positions of leadership who were isolated by race as the only, or one of the only, persons of color in a predominantly White organization. This was accomplished by highlighting their perceptions of their lived experiences relating to their work environment and strategies they employed to ensure their overall well-being while navigating an executive leadership role.

Chapter 5 provides a discussion of the findings highlighted in this chapter, as well as limitations, recommendations, and implications for future research.
Chapter 5: Discussion

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the phenomenon of Black female executives holding positions of leadership who are isolated by race as the only, or one of the only, people of color in a predominantly White organization. This study highlighted the perceptions of the participants’ lived experiences relating to their work environment and the strategies they employed to ensure their overall well-being while navigating a senior leadership role. This chapter highlights implications of research findings, limitations of the study, and recommendations for future research. To conclude, a summary of the results, based on the interpretative phenomenological approach to the analysis of the data, is presented. The research did not seek to test theories, instead, the study sought to add to the literature relating to Black women in senior leadership roles isolated by race.

IPA was determined to be the appropriate method to address the research questions because it allowed for a thorough examination of the phenomenon under review. In IPA studies, researchers are engaged in the process of interpreting the meaning of the voiced experiences of participants. Participants were encouraged to share their lived experiences as they navigated their dual marginalized status, specifically identifying as both Black and female, in senior leadership roles. The participants were also able to share how their perception of their experiences impacted their ability to cope with work-related stressors as they moved in, moved through, and/or moved out of leadership roles.
Schlossberg’s (1984) transition theory guided this study, specifically focusing on the 4-S system of coping through transitions in one’s life. The 4-S system identifies self, situation, support, and strategies as factors for consideration when navigating transitions. Schlossberg (1989) described transitions as events, or nonevents that are anticipated or unanticipated, and the individuals’ perceptions of the impact transition has on relationships, routines, roles, and assumptions.

The first factor of the 4-S system discussed in this study is self. This factor refers to the strengths and weaknesses of an individual to influence a transition. The second factor, situation, explores what type of transition is occurring. Support, the third factor, refers to the systems and/or people available to help an individual navigate transition(s). Strategy is the final factor. This factor requires an individual to assess the transition at hand and enlist and/or deploy resources to develop a coping strategy (Pellegrino & Hogan, 2015).

This study incorporated each of the four components of Schlossberg’s (1984) transition theory to address the research questions and to identify the perceptions of the factors that influenced the participants’ ability to prioritize and implement strategies to ensure their overall well-being.

Black women navigate the world with the duality of being both female and a member of a racially marginalized group. The intersection of gender and race have significant impacts on leadership development and overall health and wellness (Davis, 2016). Black feminist theory advances a framework that asserts that race and gender cannot be separated (Beal, 2008).
Carli and Eagly (2001) and Combs (2003) agree that in theory, overt discrimination, based on race and/or gender, is less acceptable in society; however, in practice, there continues to be evidence of its persistence. The persistence of overt discrimination results in non-supportive work environments, lack of mentorship, and lack of access to informal networks to increase valuable human capital. Work is demanding, regardless of one’s gender or racial background, but exposure to bias and discrimination is especially stressful for those who face racism and sexism every day (St. Jean & Feagin, 1998).

A goal of this study was the identification and implementation of strategies that can be employed by Black women in senior leadership positions to ensure their health, wellness, and well-being. The participants were selected because of their work in leadership roles in organizations where they were the only, or one of the only, women of color.

Implications of Findings

The semi-structured interviews with nine participants resulted in rich, descriptive data. Findings from the collected data are not meant to be generalized, however, they provide meaningful perspectives that may offer resiliency strategies to professional African American women who have professional aspirations of entering management or leadership roles in their organization or industry. Further, organizations can utilize this study as a roadmap to foster a culture of support for a diverse leadership team.

The research questions and individual coping factors from the theoretical framework were grouped in the following way:
1. Self: What are the lived experiences of African American female executives in their existing work environments that relate to mentorship, support, and well-being?
2. Situation: What are the perceptions of African American female leaders on the dynamics that influence their health and wellness in their work environments?
3. Support: In what ways do African American female executives describe their support networks?
4. Strategies: What strategies do African American female executive leaders employ to ensure their well-being?

Responses from the nine participants yielded four themes, one addressing each research question. The four themes that emerged were (a) self-awareness, (b) imbalance, (c) safe spaces, and (d) strength.

The Black women who participated in this study seemed to have some shared experiences associated with navigating their leadership role in predominantly White organizations regardless of industry. Those shared experiences were used to address the research questions.

Discussion of the Research Questions

This section gives an overview of the findings and their relationship to the research questions.

Research Question 1. Self: What are the lived experiences of African American female executives in their existing work environments that relate to mentorship, support, and well-being?
The data collected to address Research Question 1 resulted in self-awareness being identified as a major theme. The findings from this study build on the research highlighted in Chapter 2 relating to the assertion that leadership development is considered a critical factor in the success of a leader (Lord & Hall, 2005) requiring self-motivation, self-awareness, and self-regulation (Day et al., 2014). Self-motivation seems to be at the crux of how Black women have navigated unjust systems since being left out of the initial feminist narrative, finding a greater sense of identity as the four waves of feminism emerged.

The absence of Black women in the early narratives around access, equity, and inclusion were noted in studies about the historical context of feminism. Historically, women have faced discrimination as a specific cohort of the population. Through the various waves of feminism, woman have been able to address the gaps in access, equity, and inclusion. The first wave of feminism, focused primarily on women’s right to vote, is argued to have begun in Seneca Falls, NY, not far from the region under study, with the Women’s Rights Convention of 1848 (Gemberling, 2014). That first wave of feminism, often called the Women’s Suffrage Movement, did not include Black women; White abolitionists feared that it would interrupt White supremacy practices (Hewitt, 2010; Weiss & Brueske, 2018).

The Black women leaders in this study gave individual accounts of their lived experiences relating to Research Question 1, emphasizing perceptions of exclusion and an unsupportive work environments as a result of being the only, or one of the only, women of color in a leadership role, which is also known as tokenism (Turco, 2010). Research suggests that as a result of that isolation, or token status, Black female
executives may establish a posture of dissemblance by abstaining from full disclosure of their true selves in the workplace (Hine, 1989). The participants described their strategies for coping with those feelings of heightened self-awareness, secondary to their token status and perceived isolation, as engaging in self-regulation. Similar to dissemblance, the women spoke about the exhaustive task of self-regulation and constantly managing their facial expressions, hand gestures, and emotions to thwart being labeled as incompetent. Expressed by the participants as infuriating, the task of self-regulation was not perceived by the participants as a necessary undertaking for White men or White women.

Racial and gender-based barriers to accessing employment were addressed during the second wave of feminism with the passing of the Civil Rights Act (1964), however, according to the research highlighted in Chapter 2 and the data collected in this study, obstacles to leadership development and ascension continue to persist.

Results of this study support the argument presented by scholars that mentorship, inclusion, and the perception of a supportive work environment lend themselves to representations of social capital, a resource identified as lacking for African American female executives (Cottrill et al., 2014; Hague & Okpala, 2017). During the data collection process, the participants conveyed feelings of exclusion from key resources for leadership development. As a result, some reported seeking mentorship and support on their own, often outside their organization.

Mentorship, according to Rasheem et al. (2018) is a significant contributor to success for executive leaders. The women in the study echoed those same sentiments, all agreeing that mentorship is imperative for leadership development, although many of the
participants were unable to identify any formal mentoring relationships until much later in their career, if at all.

Even without formal mentorship, the participants shared their stories of persistence and resilience as they ascended into leadership. A common theme around competing roles and demands of professional and personal obligations became apparent in the data collection process when discussing Research Question 2.

**Research Question 2.** Situation: *What are the perceptions of African American female leaders on the dynamics that influence their health and wellness in their work environments?*

Derived from the data relating to the reported unpredictable and varying leadership roles of the professional Black woman in this study, juxtaposed with the demands of family obligations and personal endeavors, imbalance arose as the theme from the research addressing Research Question 2. Imbalance offers a reference to more than just the competing obligations of the workplace and home life. It also speaks to the overlapping forms of systemic oppression and discrimination Black women experience in their leadership roles merely as a result of the intersectionality of their race, class, and gender (Carbado et al., 2013).

The stress from just showing up in the workforce as a Black woman (Mays, 1995) is often mitigated by the individual identifying as a strong Black woman (Watson & Hunter, 2016), but not without consequence (Green, 2019). All participants reported identifying as the strong Black woman at some point in their leadership development, as a way to cope with stressors, unconventional expectations, and varying demands on them.
specifically as Black women. That identification frequently resulted in self-sacrificing behavior, ultimately leading to poor health outcomes and a decreased sense of well-being.

Few women in the study were able to move beyond the detrimental impact of identifying as the SBW. When asked about their thoughts on well-being, many participants voiced that it was unachievable, citing their many competing priorities as evidence. While all participants verbalized the importance of ensuring health, wellness, and well-being, the majority of the women self-reported being bad at it. Accounts of insomnia, anxiety, and the development of chronic diseases were commonly attributed to the varying demands in- and outside of the workplace.

With the sudden disorienting impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the heightened social unrest relating to racism and police brutality, the self-reported inability to achieve health, wellness, and well-being was made even more apparent. In response to directives from the government, professional and personal environments overlapped in ways they had not previously been accustomed. Parenting obligations were intersecting with work responsibilities as parents were conducting meetings from home in a virtual environment while simultaneously providing educational support to children who would otherwise have been in a traditional school setting. Caregivers are tasked with providing supportive nursing care to ill family members who are not able to receive the same level of care they were accustomed to because of social distancing guidelines. Navigating equally important priorities of work and home life seemed to have a significant impact on the perceptions of personal well-being for the participants.

The participants expressed the common perception that they were expected to assimilate into the dominant culture of their organization. A few of the women described
their experiences as an exhausting performance of assimilating to the White, dominant culture. Researchers have posited that Black women are burdened with having to shift their behaviors and appearance in order to assimilate, possibly stifling their true identity and inhibiting their ability to develop as leaders (Combs, 2003; Dickens et al., 2019). The mental, emotional, and physical consequences of identity shifting to mitigate the ever-present and reductive stereotypes of Black women in the workplace is cause for concern, as negative health outcomes associated with increased stressors may develop and/or persist (Assari, 2018).

One participant shared her burden of extra work to make sure that she was not perceived as incompetent. She described preparing for conversations with her boss by rehearsing ahead of time to make sure that she did not speak with her hands or show too much emotion, in an effort to distance herself from the perception of being an angry Black woman. Further, the participants shared experiences with double and triple checking emails for proper word choice and salutations as ways to emphasize their competence.

Conversely, the more seasoned leaders in this study represented outliers to the common narrative among the participants who reportedly engaged in shifting behaviors. The women, with at least a decade of leadership experience in their field, highlighted the years of influence and leadership skills they had amassed, assuring them the privilege of showing up authentically, and being respected for it. For the less seasoned leaders, in alignment with the literature, building structures for support through inclusive practices and mentorship, may be beneficial (Chow & Chan, 2008; Ensher & Murphy, 1997; Kay & Wallace, 2009). Research Question 3 discussed the participants’ perceptions of the
existing structures in place within their organizations to offer support and foster an inclusive culture.

Research Question 3. Support: In what ways do African American female executives describe their support networks?

To address this research question, the participants were asked about existing structures in place that offered support and what they felt should be in place to provide support specifically for them as Black women in leadership.

Commonly, Employee Assistance Programs (EAP) were accessible to the participants, however, as leaders, the women did not feel safe to utilize those services. Several women indicated the perception that those structures were in place for their employees or subordinates, not themselves as leaders. Activities, such as yoga or lunch time walking clubs, were rarely utilized by the participants, indicating that they did not feel like those activities were inclusive. Data collected from the participants in academia revealed the establishment of formal, culturally inclusive, round tables and direct access to more senior-raking authentic leaders for support; however, those opportunities were admittedly underutilized by the participants in this study. The participants were appreciative of the resources and considered engaging with them in the future. Dickens et al. (2019) presented findings that suggest Black women are most effective when they are able to engage with authentic leaders in their work environment.

Overwhelmingly, the data indicate a need for safe spaces as an essential structure for Black women to feel supported and to develop as leaders. The participants described safe spaces as the establishment of organic circles of trust, mainly occurring outside of work. Esther shared an example of having to physically go outside or into a corner to
have an authentic conversation with another Black woman to create the desired safe space. In a study of 17 Black women in a predominantly White institution, Sims (2008) researched the impact that lack of social engagement has on the successful development of leadership skills. Sims (2008) surmised that African American females persisted through the lack of relationships with other groups to develop their skills. What the research did not indicate was what coping skills or tools for resilience the women utilized.

The participants in this study expressed a desire for the ability to foster home-grown networks of, what many of them referred to as sisters, sister-friends, and sister-circles. For these women, the circle of trust, mentioned previously, could include people with whom the participants worked with or relationships established outside the workplace. Many of the women also mentioned the importance of having a network of individuals across sectors. The data from the interviews indicated that convening a diverse group of women with diverse thoughts, across industries makes for a more robust exchange of ideas, support, and development.

In addition to circle of trust described previously, Tatiana mentioned the value of having, what she called, a “cut the shit” person. That person is someone who does not always agree with you. She described the exchange with that individual as a sort of checks and balances to keep her on track. For Tatiana, that person was her husband

Mentorship came up again during this line of inquiry, with all the participants indicating that a mentor is critical to a successful leadership career. Regardless of their experiences with formal and/or informal mentorship, participants stated that a mentoring relationship should be a safe place.
In the literature, mentorship is defined as a dynamic, reciprocal relationship in a work environment between an advanced-career incumbent (mentor) and a beginner (mentee) aimed at promoting the career development of both (Chopra et al., 2016). In alignment with that understanding, Keturah indicated that a mentor is not a friend, but instead, a mentor provides invaluable knowledge needed to be successful at navigating a leadership role. Armed with knowledge provided by a mentor and/or the support garnered by having safe spaces, the participants found it necessary to address personal strategies for ensuring their health, wellness, and well-being. That topic is explored in Research Question 4.

**Research Question 4. Strategies: What strategies do African American female executive leaders employ to ensure their well-being?**

The participants were asked to identify personal strategies they employed to ensure their well-being. Sacrifice became the overarching theme as data were interpreted and analyzed. The absence of self-care in the quest to be perceived as strong represented the greatest demonstration of sacrifice. All participants acknowledged a common understanding of the strong Black woman persona and admitted to ascribing to it at some point during their leadership journey. Jones and Pritchett-Johnson (2018) explained that the SBW persona is a coping mechanism adopted by some Black women to display untiring strength and nurturing of others, while neglecting self-care.

Ascribing to the SBW persona was established as a way to show strength in the face of adversity and to counteract the historically negative societal characterizations of African American women as immoral, hostile, promiscuous, and emasculating to their male counterparts. However, the unfavorable consequences of the persona include the
development of anxiety, depression, obesity related to emotional eating, smoking, dysfunctional sleep patterns, not prioritizing self-care, and the development of chronic diseases as a direct result of stress (Woods-Giscombe, 2010).

Aligned with the literature, the majority of the women in this study mentioned the absence of personal strategies that promoted their well-being. However, three participants shared their strategies for prioritizing self-care such as: meditation and clean eating. One of the three women who mentioned prioritizing self-care, came to her self-care regimen after nearly succumbing to the negative health consequences associated with identifying as the SBW. She reported not making self-care a priority for many years, although always caring for others in the workplace and at home. That self-sacrificing behavior almost led to her demise. One day she came close to losing consciousness as a result of a fatally low blood sugar episode from failing to prioritize her nutrition. She simply “forgot to eat” (Tamar, Interview 8, June 19, 2020).

Sacrifice became most apparent during the data collection process as the participants shared, if anything, what have they had to give up in pursuit of leadership. The responses included: self, life, peace, and time. Each woman got emotional when speaking about her particular sacrifices. Yet, there was a sense of resilience as the accomplished Black women leaders acknowledged that they were still alive and that living life is an iterative process, with infinite opportunities for improvement. Those with clear strategies were transparent about their struggles, as were the women who continued to struggle with finding consistency with strategies. Regardless of where each woman reported being in her health, wellness, and well-being journey, they each shared words of wisdom for aspiring Black women leaders.
Words of wisdom. At the end of the interviews, individual participants were asked to share insights for future Black women leaders with regard to strategies that mitigate the negative impact of navigating a leadership role in a predominantly White organization. The responses were thoughtful and intentional. They are represented below:

- “You have to actively pursue what you want. You have to actively ask for what you want, and you may not get it. And you have to be okay with that” (Marie, Interview 1, June 9, 2020).

- “Create opportunities and open doors for the Black women coming behind you. That is important.” (Frances, Interview 2, June 9, 2020).

- Prioritize yourself. Oftentimes, as women, especially Black women, we set the needs of self aside for the needs of others. Whether it be children, spouses, parents, we set ourselves aside. And what I’ve realized on this journey is I have to prioritize myself so that I can be well for everyone else. That’s number one. Number 2 is, smell the roses along the way. Don’t get caught up in all of it so that you miss out on the little pieces. Find something in every day that you enjoy. I remember thinking to myself, I am successful, things are going well. But do I enjoy the process? And there was a time when I didn't. And so now I want to live out loud and take it all in and smell the roses along the way. Um, and I guess the last thing I would say is, don’t be afraid of deciding that you want it all because you deserve it all. You might not have all of it at one given moment, but you can have it all. You know, if you want to be the executive, be the executive. If you want to be the mommy with baby in tow, be the mommy. If you want to be the wife with that outstanding spouse,
be that person. Um, but I would say, first and foremost, be whatever it is you need to be for you. (Esther, Interview 3, June 11, 2020)

- I think that it’s important for you to really build networks, and not just the networks that are within your respective institution, but really to have a network of people, like a core team, that you can meet with and communicate with. Relationships are very important, and you want to, you want to make sure that you definitely have that core, because it's going to help you. You need you have great ideas, sure, but your world is small. If you’re only focused on what you know . . . Really making sure that you have this diversity of thought around you and people that you can talk to that helps you to grow (Ayana, Interview 4, June 12, 2020).

- Women, and women as leaders, and Black women as leaders are great. We should all just support each other. And yes, we should mentor each other (Jessica, Interview 5, June 14, 2020).

- When you're doing something that you know is morally and principally, right, you’re going to have that little fear in the pit of your stomach. Don’t let it stifle you, because that little fear that’s in the pit of our stomach makes us hold back a lot. Let that be your voice. And that, that moves you forward (Cynthia, Interview 6, June 18, 2020).

- One, always follow your intuition and your gut; it’s telling you the truth. And I guess the other thing is—there is no right path. And create your own space and lane because sometimes the people who you’re looking up to don’t want you in their lane. They don’t want you to come for them. And, sometimes
being a leader means being alone, and you have to be able to be okay with that. There will be sister circles where, we’re like, “we’re all in this together.” We are, but we’re not, because they’re not with you at your job and no one’s sitting with me as I’m driving back and forth. . . . So make your lane, choose your life. Choose your path. Don’t let anybody say this book says that these are the 10 things, and those are the most important things. If it doesn’t fit you, it’s okay. We are all different sizes and shapes and colors, and it’s okay. There is no one size fits all here. As long as you’re not hurting other people, and as long as you’re not stepping on other people to get to where you want. Because karma will be a bitch and come back for you. I think it’s important to be able to just be free and find your lane. Listen to guidance and then process it and then make your own decision. You shouldn’t be like, because these books said that I should, then I should. You have to be able to feel that inside yourself. And I think those things are very, very important. You have to be able to self-identify and go your own way and don’t let other people tell you what the path is that you should be on (Tatiana, Interview 7, June 17, 2020).

- Learn. Please, please, please, please learn from our mistakes. Because of the pressure we often feel like our back is up against the wall, which means we don’t see any other way. And sometimes we don’t trust or have a network of people that we feel like we can honestly have the conversation with. And then sometimes our ego is so wounded that we don’t want to hear that we’re wrong. All of those things cause us to withdraw, and we make more mistakes that way and we harm ourselves more, as opposed to just finding the safe
folks. And not being afraid of failure. If you’re losing yourself in order to make a thing possible. Please don’t do it. Step away, rethink about it, take some time off. Don’t believe the myth that you can’t leave something and then go back. You always can. You always can. And finally, strength is a prison. Don’t let it be (Tamar, Interview 8, June 19, 2020).

- You were created for such a time as this. You’re destined. Your destiny, your destination, your calling was in the world when you were in the womb. It is not going to be easy. There is nothing glamorous about it, and you’re finding that out. But you were purposed on this earth for where you are right now. Embrace it. Find your inner circle. You have a circle, find an inner circle that you can walk this walk with (Keturah, Interview 9, June 25, 2020).

It has been expressed in the literature that the stressors and effects of said stressors, specifically impacting Black women in racially isolated leadership positions, are arguably absent from the literature (Waring, 2003). This study sought not only to identify the stressors and their impact but to also present a discussion on personal and organizational strategies that can be implemented to mitigate the impact.

**Limitations**

Limitations of this study that may have impacted the results include researcher bias, sample size, and timing of the study.

**Researcher bias.** Potentially, the greatest limitation of the study is the researcher’s personal experience as a Black female leader in a predominantly White organization. While there were shared experiences between the researcher and the participants, the researcher made certain to engage in the process of bracketing.
Bracketing is inherent to interpretative phenomenological analysis and requires researchers to identify and then set aside their perception of the phenomenon. To accomplish this, the researcher listened attentively to the participants and sought to understand the essence of the phenomenon as experienced by the study participant. To minimize subjectivity, direct quotes from participants were used to illustrate consistency with the researcher’s interpretation.

**Sample size.** The collection of data from interviews with a small number of participants allowed for rich information to be collected and interpreted. However, the relatively small sample of nine Black women from the Central New York State region compromised the ability to generalize the results, meaning that the results cannot be considered representative of all Black women in executive leadership in predominantly White organizations. Further, participant selection was based on convenience sampling. The women were known to the researcher through professional engagements and, in turn, such engagement limited the voices of the Black women who would have fit the description of the study but were not easily accessible to the researcher. The snowball approach to sampling was mentioned as a back-up for recruitment, but it was not needed to attain the desired sample size.

**Timing of the study.** The study was conducted during the intersection of a global health pandemic (COVID-19) and heightened societal unrest relating to systemic racism highlighted by the Black Lives Matter movement. Both contexts influencing the experiences relating to the explored phenomenon. Data were collected over a period of 2 weeks and interviews lasted no longer than 90 mins. That time constraint potentially limited the opportunity for more sharing from the participants, as well as limiting
opportunities for additional probing or more participants on the part of the researcher.

The identified limitations of this study may provide a framework for future research on
the population under review, taking care to address the limitations noted.

**Recommendations**

The findings from this inquiry provide a resiliency strategy for professional Black
women who aspire to enter management or leadership roles in their organizations or
industry. The results of this study indicate that the experiences of Black women in
leadership in predominantly White organizations are somewhat salient across industries
in the Central New York State region. Conceivably, organizations and institutions can
utilize the results from this study as a roadmap to foster a culture of support and
engagement with diverse leaders. It is also plausible that with true transformation of
organizational culture to be more inclusive of diversity, opposed to merely creating the
illusion of diversity, there can be increased recruitment and retention of a qualified and
diverse leadership team. The ways that institutions can begin the transformation process
include:

- Dismantle the systems and organizational structures that create hierarchies
  and funnels limiting equitable access to important resources,
- Provide mentorship and coaching for leadership support and development,
- Create safe spaces for colleagues to engage in authentic ways, and
- Incorporate culturally inclusive activities across the organization.

Professional Black women aspiring to leadership roles can utilize the results of
this study to create their own internal structure for identifying and implementing
strategies to ensure their health, wellness, and well-being before joining a leadership team.
in a predominantly White organization. Considering the challenges of simply being both Black and female, as highlighted in the reviewed literature and derived from the data collection process, it is apparent that self-care should be prioritized for every individual, regardless of their job title or industry. Recommendations from each participant for aspiring leaders are highlighted above. Those words, from each participant, can serve as a guide while internal transformation and organizational transformation occur. Strategies for ensuring health, wellness, and well-being:

- Prioritize self-care: Whatever that looks like for the individual, do it.
- Establish a network of people to support you in your leadership development.
- Get a mentor.
- Become self-aware.
- Establish a healthy work/life balance.
- “Strength is a prison. Don’t let it be.”

**Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to explore the phenomenon of Black female executives holding positions of leadership who were isolated by race as the only, or one of the only, persons of color in a predominantly White organization. This was accomplished by highlighting their perceptions of their lived experiences relating to their work environment and strategies they employed to ensure their overall well-being while navigating in an executive leadership role.

Black women in executive leadership throughout the Central New York State region, working in healthcare, education, government, nonprofit, and private sectors are faced with a multitude of challenges, expectations, and demands. As a direct result of
their dual marginalized status of being both Black and female they are subjected to stressors stemming from the combined effects of racism and sexism. In the work environment, Black women are navigating microaggressions, isolation, invisibility, and hypervisibility—all while striving to achieve success in their leadership role. In their personal lives, these women engage in activities relating to caring for others while navigating their personal pursuits. All of these tasks, combined, create an environment that is not conducive with maximizing individual health, wellness, and well-being.

The exploratory nature of this study accomplished its goal of broadly addressing each research question. Continued investigation into the perceptions and lived experiences of African American female executive leaders will help to identify barriers to overall well-being and possibly to identify more strategies to promote health, wellness, and well-being for the population being studied. The research will allow organizations to develop policies to create an inclusive and non-threatening work environment for the African American female executive leader.


Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (2000). The only generalization is: There is no generalization. In R. Gomm, M. Hammersley, & P. Foster (Eds.), *Case Study Method* (pp. 27-45). London, UK: SAGE.


Appendix A
Letter of Introduction

Dear potential study participant,

I am a current doctoral candidate in the Educational Doctorate in Executive Leadership program, with a focus on social justice in the School of Education at St. John Fisher College in Rochester, NY. My interest is in the lived experiences of African American female executives. More specifically, I am interested in the strategies to promote well-being for the African American female executive working in racially isolated positions, as the sole Black women in leadership of her organization. As part of my research, I will be conducting one-on-one interviews with participants who identify with the focus of the study mentioned above. Your participation would be invaluable to my research.

Participants agreeing to take part in this study will be asked to participate in one-on-one, in-person interviews with this researcher. The interviews will be no more than one hour in length and will be audio recorded. Taking part in research is always optional and consent may be withdrawn at any time. All information related to the study will be kept confidential and personal identifiers will not be linked to the results of the study.

Thank you for your willingness to participate in this study. I look forward to meeting with you. If you know of any other Black female executive leaders in the Central New York area who may be interested in participating in this study, please share my contact information provided below.
Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any questions as you read over this material. I am happy to review any of this with you and answer any questions you may have.

Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

Brandiss Pearson, RN, MSN, CNE, FNP-C  
Doctoral candidate, St. John Fisher College  
Supervising faculty: Dr. Linda Hickmon-Evans
Appendix B

Informed Consent Form

INFORMED CONSENT FORM - Interview
St. John Fisher College

Title of study: African American female executive leaders: Identifying and implementing strategies that ensure well being

Name of researcher: Brandiss Pearson, RN, MSN, FNP-C, Ed. D. candidate, SJFC

Faculty Supervisor: Linda Hickmon-Evans, Ph. D.

Purpose of study: Explore the lived experiences of African American female executive leaders and identify strategies adopted to ensure their well-being

Place of study: Anchor (medical, educational, or governmental) institutions in Central New York

Length of participation: 30 – 60 minute interview

Risks & benefits: Minimal psychological risk associated with the interview process. The results of this study may guide future research to promote strategies for health/wellness and well-being for African American female executives.

Method for protecting privacy: Each participant will be assigned a unique identifier/pseudonym. Consent forms and data collected during the study will be kept under lock and key in a secure location by the researcher. Participants will solely be identified by the pseudonym assigned. There will no contact with employers regarding participation.

Your rights: As a study participant, you have a 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.

Your signature below means that you have received this information, have asked the questions you currently have about the above-mentioned study, and have received answers to those questions. You will receive a copy of the signed and dated form to keep for future reference.

**Participant:** By signing this consent form, you indicate that you are voluntarily choosing to take part in this study.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Signature of Participant</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Printed Name</th>
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**Researcher:** Your signature below means that you have explained the study to the participant and have answered any questions about the research.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Signature of researcher</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Printed Name</th>
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Appendix C

Interview Protocol and Alignment Chart for RQ/Theory/IQ

Introduction of Study

- Clarify my role as researcher
- Provide overview of IRB protocols and policies
- Frame purpose of the study
- Obtain consent

Research Questions (RQ)

1. Self: What are the lived experiences of African American female executives in their current work environment related to mentorship, support, and well-being?

2. Situation: What are the perceptions of African American female leaders on dynamics that influence their health, wellness and well-being in their work environment?

3. Support: In what ways do African American female executives describe their support networks?

4. Strategies: What strategies do African American female executive leaders employ to ensure their well-being?

Interview Questions (IQ)

This interview is being conducted to gain an understanding of the lived experiences of African American female executives and strategies employed to ensure their health, wellness, and well-being. The interview questions are meant to get an understanding of your lived experiences. The questions that will be asked during the interview follow.
RQ 1. Self: What are the lived experiences of African American female executives in their current work environment related to mentorship, support, and well-being?

IQ 1. Can you describe a typical working day for you in your role as a leader in your organization?

IQ 2. Can you describe your leadership style?

IQ 3. Throughout your leadership experiences past and present, what has been your experience related to mentorship or support.

IQ 4. Why do you stay in the work?

RQ 2. Situation: What are the perceptions of African American female leaders on dynamics that influence their health, wellness and well-being in their work environment?

IQ 5. What do health, wellness, and well-being mean to you?

IQ 6. If at all, how do you see your health, wellness, and well-being impacted by your leadership responsibilities and/or your work environment?

RQ 3. Support: In what ways do African American female executives describe their support networks?

IQ 7. Can you describe any structures or resources in place in or through your organization that serve to provide support to you?

IQ 8. What structures do you think should be in place for Black women in leadership within a predominantly White institution?

RQ 4. Strategies: What strategies do African American female executive leaders employ to ensure their well-being?
IQ 9. What are some strategies you employ to maintain your health, wellness, and well-being?

IQ 10. (a) Are you familiar with the strong Black woman schema (SBW)?
Kara Manke stated that many Black women in America report feeling pressured to act like superwomen, projecting themselves as strong, self-sacrificing, and free of emotion to cope with the stress of race- and gender-based discrimination in their daily lives.
(b) If so, do you or have you ever ascribed to SBW & what are the positive and negative implications?

IQ 11. If at all, how important is it to have a mentor?

IQ 12. If anything, what have you had to sacrifice in pursuit of leadership?

IQ 13. Is there anything else you would like to share?

Alignment Chart for RQ/Theory/IQ

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Question</th>
<th>Theory</th>
<th>Interview Question</th>
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| 1                 | 1. Self | 7. Can you describe a typical working day for you in your role as a leader in your organization?  
8. Can you describe your leadership style?  
9. What has been your experience as an African American female executive in your workplace as it relates to mentorship, support, and well-being?  
10. Why do you stay in the work? |
| 2                 | 3. Situation | 11. What do health, wellness, and well-being mean to you?  
12. If at all, how do you see your health, wellness, and well-being impacted by your leadership responsibilities and/or your work environment? |
| 3                 | 4. Support | 13. What structures are in place for you as an African American female executive that serve to provide support to you?  
14. What structures do you think should be in place for Black women in leadership within a predominantly White institution? |
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<tr>
<th>Research Question</th>
<th>Theory</th>
<th>Interview Question</th>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>5. Strategy</td>
<td>15. What are some strategies you employ to address, maintain your health and wellness?</td>
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<td>16. (a) Are you familiar with the strong Black woman schema (SBW)? Kara Manke stated that Many black women in America report feeling pressured to act like superwomen, projecting themselves as strong, self-sacrificing, and free of emotion to cope with the stress of race- and gender-based discrimination in their daily lives.</td>
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<td>(b) If so, do you or have you ever ascribed to SBW &amp; what are the positive and negative implications?</td>
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<td>17. If at all, how important is it to have a mentor?</td>
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<td>18. If anything, what have you had to sacrifice in pursuit of leadership?</td>
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<td>19. Is there anything else you would like to share?</td>
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