

*Full Length Research Paper*

# Shattering the Glass Ceiling: The Leadership Development of African American Women in Higher Education

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**The purpose of this research study was to explore the intersectionality of race and gender for African American women through their lived experiences of how they developed as leaders. This qualitative study aimed to research the implications of race and gender for African American women in academia. A phenomenological research method was employed to capture the essence of the participants' stories and to fully understand their common experiences. Results show that the women in the study confirmed that race and gender informed their development as leaders in academia. Five themes were generated from their stories. In general, most of them described how the intersection of race and gender affected their leadership development and career trajectories. In spite of the barriers they encountered, these women perform skillfully in an environment where inequities, negative assumptions and doubts are prevalent. Even through adversity, they carry out their responsibilities but often in an atmosphere where they constantly have to prove themselves. Yet, these African American female leaders have persevered and continue to demonstrate their ability to rise above and perform with tenacity.**

**Keywords:** Intersectionality, Black Feminist Theory, Leadership development, African American women, Women in Higher Education

## Introduction

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, leadership traits were studied by scholars to determine what made certain people great leaders. These theories, called the “great man” theories, focused on identifying the innate qualities and characteristics possessed by great social, political and military leaders (Northouse, 2010) mostly associated with White men (Parker & Ogilvie, 1996, Bass, 1990; Northouse, 2010). It was believed that people were born with these traits and only “great” people possessed these characteristics (Bass, 1990; Northouse, 2010; Ott, Parkes & Simpson, 2008). Horsford (2012) stated that “such theories have not similarly explored the natural, inborn or divine gifts and traits associated with the ‘great woman,’ and certainly not women of disadvantage and color” (p. 13).

In recent years, the amount of literature on women’s leadership has increased; however, few studies explore leadership development of African American women in academia. Much of the literature has been limited to the traditionally defined views of leadership; that is, most of the research concentrated on leadership and managerial aspects adopted by White males in the corporate world. There have been however, an increasing number of studies conducted on female managers and leaders

that attempt to identify key success factors or pitfalls (Morrison, White & Van Velsor, 1982). But, most of the research has been done with women at lower levels or in small organizations. Bell (1992) points out that research on women in management and women of color have been largely ignored. Waring (2003) indicates that much of the research on the leadership development of women has often been confined within studies of women’s history or feminist literature and states that “a review of the existing body of knowledge on women in management might lead to the observation that much of the scholarship addresses the experiences of only one group of women managers and does not address the effects of race and gender on African American women” (p. 1).

Research has also been conducted on how gender might influence leadership (Waring, 2003). While some scholars have studied African American female leaders from a sociological perspective, few studies have researched how race and gender interacts to inform their leadership development (Collins, 1990; Stanley, 2009; Byrd, 2009). Furthermore, rarely is intersectionality considered and even less frequently are discussions of how one’s race and gender might influence one’s conception of leadership in academia.

Research on African American women as leaders is often subsumed within feminist literature (Stanley, 2009), and as such does not contribute to the understanding, or lack of understanding, of the intersectionality of race and gender that African American women face in their leadership development. Therefore, articulating how racial and gendered identities inform the leadership development experiences of African American women in academia is needed to challenge the traditional discourse. It is also useful for understanding the leadership experiences of this group.

Although some research has been conducted on African American women in leadership positions (Byrd, 2009), most studies have generally focused on topics such as barriers to equal opportunity and a lack of career advancement for African American women rather than focusing on individual experiences. Furthermore, the literature is often subsumed with how minority women fare and lead within predominantly White organizations and as such, do not add to an understanding of their leadership development. As a result, there is a marked absence of research on how African American women experience leadership and develop as leaders. Toward this end, it might help our understanding to recognize the changing faces of leadership in organizations and make theoretical frameworks that are applicable to these identified groups available to practitioners and professionals (Brinson, 2006).

This research will report the results of a study conducted on African American women in executive level positions in academia; and represents a portion of a broader study on women in both business and academia. This study will be addressing the importance of studying the experiences of African American women to better understand the origins and conceptions of their development as leaders and answer the research question:

*In what ways did race and gender identities inform African American women leadership development experiences?*

### **Review of the Literature**

Barriers to leadership opportunities are a global phenomenon where women, when compared to men, are disproportionately concentrated in lower-level and lower-authoritative leadership positions (Northouse, 2010). These barriers are generally perceived to be against women, but to a larger extent are against African-American women executives (Parker & Ogilvie, 1996). According to Parker (1994) and Talley-Ross (1992), African American women report that racism, rather than sexism, is the greatest barrier to opportunities in dominant culture organizations (as cited in Parker & Ogilvie, 1996). Furthermore, only a few studies have examined how race impacts leadership in dominant culture organizations (Parker & Ogilvie, 1996; hooks, 1984, Parker, 2005). Ransford & Miller (1983) suggested that attitudes towards women continue to be profoundly affected by past and current racial oppression.

To capture the qualities of leaders that facilitate positive outcomes, leadership theorists are attempting to more fully

delineate the qualities that constitute good leadership (Eagly, 2005). When the female gender role is inconsistent with a leader role, prejudice toward women as leaders is a common outcome. People are unaccustomed in many organizational contexts to women possessing substantial authority that encompasses decision-making power (Eagly, 2005). Eagly contends “that not only do people doubt that women possess the appropriate competencies, but also they may resent the overturning of the expected and usual hierarchical relation between the sexes” (p. 465).

The literature was replete with studies on the differences between male and female characteristics and traits that are normally associated with leadership, such as individualism vs. collaboration (Loden, 1985; Helgesen, 1990; Cantor & Bernay, 1992). Modern discussions of leadership are based upon two concepts: transactional or transformational leadership (Fisher & Koch, 2001). According to Parker (2005), transformational leadership places an emphasis on social change and emancipation. For African American women, transformational leadership has been closely aligned to their leadership style (Walker, 2009; Byrd & Stanley, 2009; Parker, 2005).

According to a 2007 Department of Labor Statistics report, women represented 46% of managerial positions across the United States (U.S. Department of Labor, 2007). In 2011, that number had increased to 51% (U.S. Department of Labor, 2012). However out of that number, there were relatively few women who were leaders in corporate ranks. In Fortune 500 corporate positions held by women in 2013, only 4.0 % held CEO and senior level positions (Catalyst, 2013). In October 2010, the White House released a special report, *Jobs and Economic Security for America's Women*, written by the National Economic Council (NEC) (2010) which noted that only 2.6 percent of Fortune 500 companies are led by a female CEO, and only 15.2 percent of those companies' board seats are occupied by women.

Valian (1998) indicated that inequality for women existed in many professions, such as in business, sports, military, academia and politics. Currently, women constitute nearly half of the U.S. labor force, yet encounter discrimination concerning their positions, salaries, and possibilities for promotion (Beck & Davis, 2005). According to the National Economic Council report, only 1 in 14 women earn more than \$100,000 a year, as compared with 1 in 7 men (Zeidman, 2011). Additionally, minority women are entering the labor market at an increasing rate but continue to lack the power and access to leadership positions at the executive level. In spite of having a college degree and work experience, this segment of the population continues to be passed over for promotions and are paid lower salaries than their counterparts (Gibelman, 2003).

Many explanations have been posited about what prevents women from attaining executive-level leadership positions. Catalyst (2005) surveyed Fortune 1000 CEO's and women executives about the challenges they faced in advancing to the highest level of leadership positions within their organizations.

Less than one-third of the 120 CEO's and the 705 female executives considered a lack of desire to advance to senior levels a barrier to women's advancement. Wellington, Kropf & Gerkovich (2003) noted that women may not be aspiring to these roles because they are not aware that leadership positions are open to them. Furthermore, female executives may be discouraged by superiors from pursuing these roles, or may not be in the talent pool when succession plans are made (Wellington et al., 2003).

### **Leadership Development in Women**

Double standards for female and male leaders are still perpetuated in today's workplaces. Oftentimes, women face challenges when working in male-dominated organizational cultures because to achieve success, women typically have to adapt to the organizational culture by taking on male attitudes and values (Carli & Eagly, 2001). "Corporate policies and practices subtly maintain the status quo by keeping men in positions of corporate power" (Lockwood, 2004, p. 2). Sczesny (2003) indicated that holding leadership roles could be problematic for women because the schemas that people hold of leaders are different from those they hold of women.

Stereotypical assumptions about the gender differences between men and women make conditions difficult for women to obtain the opportunity to be placed in senior leadership positions (Heilman, 2001). The traditional defined model of leadership assumes that good leadership is essentially masculine. Such masculine characteristics as being a good decision-maker, organized, assertive and strategic, have been and continue to be associated with good leadership. On the other hand, women leaders have been described as sensitive, caring, compassionate, responsive, democratic, participative and nurturing (Fisher & Koch, 2001). Feminine leadership styles offer attributes such as being collaborative, inclusive, democratic and participative (Northouse, 2010). "Female leadership styles are also credited with effectively managing and inspiring performance and possessing high levels of cultural competence" (Traub, 2011, p. 36).

According to Traub (2011), "for too long, women have carried the water alone in the name of advancing themselves into leadership positions with limited success" (p. 36). Women are scarce in top leadership positions and the managerial parity between men and women continues on a downward trajectory. A September 28, 2010, Wall Street Journal article, *Slow Progress for Women in Management Positions*, reported that at the rate women are moving into management – from 39 percent to only 40 percent of all management positions in the past 10 years – women won't realize managerial parity in the near future (Silverman, 2010).

Nevertheless, women are projected to account for 51.2 percent of the increase in total labor force growth between 2008 and 2018 (U.S. Department of Labor Women's Bureau, 2010). The executive summary for the *Jobs and Economic Security for America's Women* report stated, "As the majority of college

graduates and nearly 50 percent of the workforce, women are in a position to drive our 21<sup>st</sup>-century economy" (National Economic Council, 2010, p. 1). While women in the workforce on average constitute 47% of middle management positions in U.S. organizations, this figure drops substantially at the executive management level where women hold 17% of the positions (Guthrie & Roth, 1999).

As women ascend to leadership positions, the barriers to assure continuity and retention of top female executive talent become more complex. With the current pipeline already lacking female leaders, the issues of supply and demand have long-term effects for women breaking through the glass ceiling. On the supply side, women are increasingly outperforming men in college, and their sheer numbers outstrip men in gaining advanced degrees (Hackett, 2011). While on the demand side, organizations cannot continue to afford to squander female talent and the strategic capability it represents for businesses. The constructions of diversity-as-capital discourse suggest that the same common sense discussions of women's leadership may be taken up very differently depending on the nature of the field and institutional context in which it circulates (Wilkinson & Blackmore, 2008).

Even though women and minorities have increased their representation in the labor pool, female leaders in corporate America still only hold middle management positions. While women have been entering the workforce in greater numbers and making progress into management and professional positions, access to senior management remains limited (Catalyst, 2001). Moreover, there is a marked absence of research that focuses on the experiences of African American women who have ascended to leadership roles in academia (Parker, 2005; Stanley, 2009; Bell, 1990).

Due to the changing workplace demographics and shifts in the global environment, new leadership and ways of managing people will be required. According to Ready (2004), it is imperative for organizations to identify and develop female leaders who can work effectively across organizational and geographic boundaries. However, to be successful in the future, companies will need to select and develop leaders who are competent in managing organizations as a whole. Organizations need leaders that have some charisma and possess the ability to inspire followers to subordinate their own interest for the good of the organization. It is important that today's organizations have the ability to identify a diverse workforce which will include both women and women of color, to provide leadership skills that will transform these enterprises to meet the challenges of the new global marketplace.

### **Leadership Development in African American Women**

Black and multiracial feminist theories argue that race and gender are socially constructed categories that contain inherent power differences (Collins, 2000). Black feminist theory articulates a framework that argues race and gender cannot be separate (Beal, 1970). Furthermore, Beal posits that African

American women's experiences are often characterized by "double barriers" which lead to disadvantages as a result of multiple marginalized identities. According to Glazer-Ramo (2001), as "more women earn professional degrees for entry into traditionally male professions, women experience isolation, exclusion from informal networks, and systemic discrimination" (p.145).

According to Meyerson and Fletcher (2000), the limited progress of minority female executives has also been attributed to a "glass ceiling," an invisible barrier to advancement based on attitudinal or organizational biases. In increasingly competitive global markets, firms are recognizing that barriers to the advancement of African American women can be detrimental to organizational effectiveness. Nohria and Khurma (2010) stated that "the barriers to women's advancement undermine organizational performance and compromise fundamental principles of equal opportunity and social justice" (p. 189). Since women are now a majority of college degree graduates and represent an equal share of the talent available for leadership, reducing the obstacles for African American women can also reduce the amount of attrition in organizations. In an increasing competitive and multicultural environment, organizations cannot afford to squander their human resources (Nohria & Khurma, 2010). "Accordingly, the glass ceiling can be costly to an organization, not only in terms of lost productivity among women of color who feel stymied in the careers, but also in terms of turnover costs and annual salaries (Ragins & Sundstrom, 1990).

There have been a number of different views on the absence of women of color in executive leadership positions. One reason is due to overt and covert discrimination in employment. While this has become less acceptable in theory, in practice there is still an abundance of documentation that women and minorities still experience discrimination (Carli & Eagly, 2001). Another factor that has been reported that supports barriers for advancement of African American women has been referred to as the "pipeline problem" (Carli & Eagly, 2001). According to Carli and Eagly, the pipeline concept implies that women with the appropriate education and background are not available; thus, they are not hired (2001). Oftentimes, organizations do not create environments that support the advancement of highly skilled and capable African American women to be developed to assume leadership roles. Lastly, the lack of access to informal networks maybe another reason that African American women are still underrepresented in upper management ranks (Combs, 2003).

As women and minorities increase their representation in the labor pool, it behooves organizations to compete to hire, utilize, and retain their best talent (Donahue, 1998). In order for African American women to be empowered, identifying the power structures that constrain their power and how these structures can be resisted or eliminated is critical for successful leadership (Collins, 1990).

### **African American Women in Academia**

Historically, education has been the familiar ground for African American women since it was always one of the respectable professions for African Americans to pursue. In the nineteenth century, Black women were schoolteachers among free Blacks before and after emancipation; however few obtained positions higher than those employed in Black elementary and secondary schools (Benjamin, 1997). In 1993, Lucy Slowe published the *Higher Education of Negro Women* in the *Journal of Negro Education* and argued for the necessary preparation of Black women for the modern world (Cardwell, 2008).

Through racism and discrimination, Black men and women were remanded to historically Black colleges and universities. Furthermore, in the historically Black colleges, sexism consigned Black women to activities associated with the female arts including— teaching, home economics, or performing specific duties closely linked to the interest of students (Benjamin, 1997). From early on, African American women in the academy were faced with oppositional alienation from the center of authority in the intellectual walls of higher education.

During the past thirty years, African American women have entered the academy in greater numbers than ever before. However, although the number of African American women in the academy has increased, they still remain largely invisible (Benjamin, 1997). While women and minorities have enjoyed some gains, the majority of college presidents are still predominantly White males (Ross & Green, 2000).

Recent data reveals that in 2006, 88% of college presidents were White males (Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2007). According to the results from the study, the "typical" American president was a married, White male who had an earned doctorate and had served as a president for an average of nine years. The report also stated that women of color saw consistent but small gains. Moreover, between 1986 and 2006, the percentage of African American women presidents rose from 3.9 percent to 8.1 percent (Association of American College and Universities, 2007). By 2011, two African American women led two prestigious, predominantly White institutions. In 1999, Dr. Shirley Ann Jackson became the 18<sup>th</sup> president of Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, and in 2001, Dr. Ruth Simmons became the first Black president of Brown University, an Ivy League institution.

Despite substantial advancements toward gender equity and equality, evidence of substantial disparity still exists within senior level positions in academia for African American women. According to Dugger (2001) and Williams (2005), a small number of women and minorities progress up the academic career ladder to become institutional leaders. Researchers have underscored significant concerns that are specific to minority women administrators at dominant-culture institutions of higher learning (Lloyd-Jones, 2009). "Such findings reveal that African American female administrators encounter significant barriers within academia itself that discourage them from becoming productive and satisfied members" (Turner, Myers, & Creswell, 1999, p. 28).

Most of the research surrounding women in higher education postulated that universities have been and continue to be traditionally dominated and run by men (Cullen & Luna, 1993). For women of color, their dualistic roles of being both a woman and minority continue to create role incongruity. Thus, they face perceptions of having to perform gender-stereotyped roles within academia and experience greater barriers than their male counterparts.

According to Benjamin (1997) during the 1980's, African American female administrators began increasing their share of positions in higher education. The American Council on Education reported that, "in 1989 African American women made up 4.2 percent of full-time administrators, which represents a 87 percent change from the previous decade" (ACE, 1989, p. 26). For African American females, these numbers have not significantly changed in proportion to the number of women in educational administration (Gilroy, 2005). Nevertheless, African American women are still underrepresented in mid to upper-management level administrative positions.

An examination of statistics of African American women in higher education revealed that few have reached the highest level positions in the administration of colleges and universities in predominantly White institutions. While both African American men and women have become presidents of more than 90 Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), in 2001 less than 6% of all college presidents were African American and less than 1% was headed by African American women (Fisher & Koch, 2001). Current data revealed that women increased their representation as college presidents to 26% in 2011, but only 4% of all presidents were women of color (American Council on Education, 2012). In 2011, six percent of all college presidents were African American and African American women represented 34% of the total proportion (American Council on Education, 2012).

According to Ross & Green (2000), African American women seeking high level administrative positions at predominantly White higher education institutions experience significant obstacles. Sturnick, Milley & Tisinger (1991) conclude that because of gender and strongly patriarchal institutions, African American women have been treated differently; have labored within unsupportive systems, and have perhaps been required to perform at a higher level than their male counterparts in order to achieve success. "This is a value problem and is one that through observation, discussion, and verification should be eradicated in a democratic society based on merit" (Ross & Green, 2000, p. 15). For African American women, cultural differences and stereotypes should not be barriers in presidential search and selection processes.

In the academy, an African American woman "work(s) to develop expertise and authority in her chosen field in order to balance her cultural values, beliefs, philosophies, and behaviors with those that are fundamentally different from her own" (Benjamin, 1997, p. 243). J. Nefta Baraka's, *Collegiality in the*

*Academy: Where Does the Black Woman Fit*, states that different cultural orientations intertwine with racism and sexism, making it difficult for African American women to fit into the White academe (as cited in Benjamin, 1997). There is a consensus that African American women in general face a myriad of challenges in the academy that impede their professional growth and limits their ascendancy to leadership participation in higher education (Battle & Doswell, 2004; Benjamin, 1997).

African American women in academia seek open access to the opportunities that their abilities, their interests, and their willingness to work entitle them. African American women in the academy "believe such equality of opportunity is their right and should be granted to them willingly" (Furniss & Graham, 1974, p. 6). Giscombe (2007) asserts that while in pursuit of leadership positions, women still face social and cultural barriers pertaining to organizational norms, perceptions surrounding gender congruity, and stereotypes. By understanding these perceptions about gender roles and norms for African American women in the academia, existing barriers may be addressed and strategies developed to increase their representation in leadership positions within higher education.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Research in the 1980s and 1990s increasingly focused on uncovering connections among systems of oppression organized along constructs of social class, gender, race and nationalism (Collins, 2003). Social science research generally viewed social class as a descriptive, static system of individual classification (Collins, 2003; Eagly, 2005). Viewing social class through these lenses created a monolithic view of leadership development operating in a historic fashion according to its own natural laws and rules (Collins, 2003). These boundaries divided women from men who traditionally were given access to positions of substantial authority.

The theoretical framework for this study incorporated feminist and socio-cultural theories for contextualizing the epistemological worldview of a group of people who had experienced racism, discrimination and marginalization (Bernal, 2002). These theories challenge the dominant discourses in structures and processes that dialectically marginalize and emancipate (Bernal, 2002; Parker, 2005, hooks, 1984). The theoretical framework for this study (see figure 1) drew on the following theories: feminist, Black feminist, socio-cultural and intersectionality. Each theory is presented to explain the importance of the experiences of African American women in relation to their race and gender identities and leadership development.

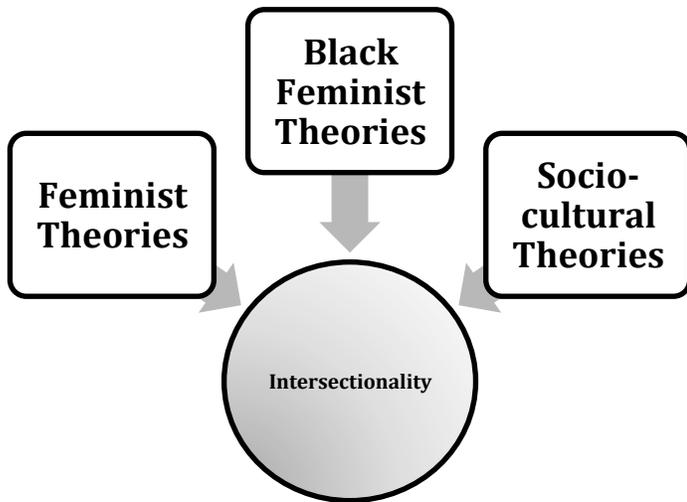


Figure 1. *Study Framework*

Feminist scholarship has inspired fundamental changes in the ways individuals view social groups and processes. According to Collins (2003), feminist scholarship challenges several dimensions of leadership development by focusing on the centrality of gender. Feminist theories have focused on the oppression of women and aim to understand the nature of gender inequality. Feminism's narrow focus on gender equity has neglected to examine how both race and gender affect the oppression of women. Thus, the intersection of race and gender on leadership development has received little attention within the confines of traditional literature. Conversely, paradigms of Black feminist theories have identified new directions and frameworks for studies on African American female leaders.

Black feminist theory provides African American women the opportunity to speak from an experience unbeknownst to other women. According to Collins (2000), Black feminist theory encompasses a place of marginalization in which African American women are different from White and other minority women. African American women may have different experiences of power, growth, and development compared to other women. Thus, this research seeks to capture these lived experiences through the lenses of the participants in the study.

The dual and systematic discriminations of racism and sexism remain pervasive and permeate throughout many organizational sectors (Gaetane, Williams & Shermaine, 2009). Miller & Vaughn (1997) assert that, "the twin guise of racism and sexism still imposes great restraints on the utilization of the competence and talents of African American women" (p. 179). According to Merriam & Caffarella (1999), "socio-cultural refers to theoretical perspectives that consider race, gender, and social class in analyzing power dynamics within bureaucratic and other systems where power can be used to oppress (as cited in Byrd, 2009). Socio-cultural theories position African American women within an interlocking system of race, gender

and social class, which in turn can create disempowering experiences as leaders in predominantly White organizations (Stanley, 2009).

According to Parker (2005), intersectionality is a means for analyzing and interpreting the experiences that African American women encounter while holding positions of authority in predominantly White organizations. African American women have a connection through race and gender within society and can identify with other African American women from this perspective. Stanley (2009) surmised that through intersectionality, "the lived experiences of African American women are not located within separate spheres of race, gender and social class. Rather, these spheres intersect and shape social realities that are not captured within traditional feminist discourse" (p. 552).

### **Feminist Theories**

Research on feminism has examined feminist perspectives on the oppression and discrimination of women. Key researchers on feminist discourse include Liz Stanley, Mary Belenky, Gloria Bowles, and Sandra Harding (Wadsworth, 2001) who all focus on the rights of women. Feminist theories have focused on the oppression of women (hooks, 1984; Eisenstein, 2004). Feminism's presence has come about precisely because many women have rejected men's interpretation of their lives (Gottfried, 1996). Through feminist theory, women can centralize their experiences and the social predicaments that bear the brunt of sexist oppression as a way to understand the collective social status of women in the United States (hooks, 1984). "Feminist theory addresses among other things, the conditions for the actuality of men and women – historical, political, economical, and ontological along with the virtual forces this actuality contains and through which it can be transformed" (hooks, 1984, p. 101).

Feminist scholarship has contributed to developments in qualitative inquiry since the 1970s. Feminist theories have focused on the oppression of women and address the possibility of considering the needs of women (Eisenstein, 2004). According to Harding and Norberg (2005), "feminist research principles and practices are inclusive of awareness and are sensitive towards underrepresented groups" (p. 2015). Grosz (2010) states that feminist theory and feminist philosophy share concern about a common subject of analysis – "woman, women, the feminine and their social, political, economic, cultural and conceptual relations – along with the need to understand how change is possible" (p. 102). Feminist theories aim to develop and use concepts to articulate those spaces whose interference and elaboration may produce new alignment of forces, new relations of power and new concepts (Grosz, 2010).

A few scholars on feminism have identified the unique characteristics of women as leaders. Gottfried (1996), Vannoy (2001), Eagly and Karau (1991) found certain characteristic and management styles common among women. Van Velsor and Hughes (1990) "found that managerial women are more likely

than men to engage in reflective learning about self and others in connection with others” (p. 37), a finding echoed by Cafferella and Olson’s (1993) study on managers’ transformative leadership experiences.

According to feminist perspectives on leadership, the traditional approaches to leadership have focused on serving and have included adaptive leadership and transformational leadership (Parker, 2005). Parker also posited that traditional masculine models of leadership are essentially “man stories” (p. 57). Mezirow (2000) and Parker (2005) suggested that servant leadership and some feminist perspectives are male-centered. According to Parker (2005), the servant leadership model may fit the gender-neutral stereotypes for African American women, but contradicts the difference in which gender relations differ between men and women. Traditional servant leadership and most feminist perspectives of leadership theories have originated in a male-centered, male-dominated view of leadership (Parker, 2005).

In feminism, there has been noted a direct correlation between feminist theory and the desires of women scholars to conduct gender identity and phenomenological research methods. Butler (1988) postulated:

Feminist theory has often been critical of naturalistic explanations of sex and sexuality that assume that the meaning of women’s social existence can be derived from some fact of their physiology. In distinguishing sex from gender, feminist theories have disputed causal explanations that assume that sex dictates or necessitates certain social meanings for women’s experiences. Phenomenological theories of human embodiment have also been concerned to distinguish between the various physiological and biological causalities that structure bodily existence and the meanings that embodied existence assumes in the context of lived experience. (p. 520)

Feminist research has focused mainly on White women and a small number of women of color (Collins, 1990; hooks, 1994; Parker, 2005). hooks (1994) suggests that from the very onset, feminism defined a social equality with men. hooks further believed that feminism became a movement that would primarily affect the social standing of White women in middle and upper class groups and only affecting the social status of working class and poor women in a very marginal way. According to hooks (1994), Black women’s interests in the feminist movement are prone to a dualistic thinking of being Black and feminist “which continually perpetuate the belief that the self is formed in opposition to another” (p. 34). Given the fear of being misunderstood, it has been difficult for Black women to give expression to their interest in feminist concerns.

### **Black Feminist Theories**

Early feminist scholarship often theorized from the position of White, middle-class women, yet generalized their experiences to be representative of all women (Vannoy, 2001). Thus, a new

set of feminist theories emerged from the challenges identified by women of color. Black feminist theories have recommended the deconstruction of feminist theories according to the postmodern perspective (Parker, 2005). Black feminist research pioneers have developed and authored the concept of empowerment for Black women, suggesting ways of communicating the oppression of Black women (hooks, 1984; Collins, 2000). Lastly, hooks (1984) asserted that the goal of Black feminists is to recognize the struggle of Black women against multiple oppressions.

According to Parker (2005), the silencing of some groups of women and men while privileging others in the study of organizational leadership has resulted from the theoretical perspectives that frame an understanding of gender, discourse and organization. Black feminist theorizing is the understanding of race, class and gender as simultaneous forces (Vannoy, 2001). Black feminist theories emphasize that in many contexts, race and gender cannot be separated (hooks, 1984; Collins, 1990).

African Americans have not been exempt from the effects of diminished opportunities that accompany racial segregation and group discrimination. Historically, the oppression and discrimination of African American women in the United States began as slaves and domestic servants (Freeman, 1995). The domesticated worker has been closely attributed to African American women. The emphasis on participation in the paid labor force and escape from the confines of the home seemed foreign to Black women. Through their experiences of race and gender oppression, Black women were strongly aware of their group identity, and consequently, more suspicious of White women who defined much of their feminism in personal and individualistic terms (Dill, 1983).

Gender, race, ethnicity, and social class comprise a complex hierarchical stratification system in the United States, in which upper class White men and women oppress men and women of disadvantaged races, ethnicities and religions (Vannoy, 2001). Race, gender and social class are intertwined and multiracial feminism has shown that gender is intertwined with race and ethnicity (Lorber, 1998). Black feminism or multiracial feminism focuses on the intersectionality of race, gender, ethnicity and social class. Researchers who study the concept of intersectionality argue that one cannot look at these social statutes alone, nor can one be added to another, but the synergy between them constructs a social location (Vannoy, 2001). Thus, the social location of men and women differ.

According to hooks (1984), Black women are in an unusual position in society. African American women not only are collectively at the bottom of the occupational ladder, but their overall social status is lower than that of any other group (hooks, 1984). Black women’s lived experiences shape their consciousness in such a way that their worldview differs from those who have a degree of privilege (hooks, 1984). Thus, hooks asserted that in the “feminist struggle, Black women need to recognize the special vantage point their marginality

has and make use of this perspective to criticize the dominant racist, classist, sexist hegemony as well as to envision and create a counter-hegemony” (hooks, 1984, p. 15).

Collins (1997) stated the notion of standpoint refers to historically shared, group-based experiences. The notion of standpoint refers to groups having shared histories based on their shared location in relations of power. “Groups have a degree of permanence over time such that group realities transcend individual experiences” (Collins, 1997, p. 375). For African American women, standpoint theory places less emphasis on individual experiences within socially constructed groups than on the social conditions that construct such groups. Standpoint theory negates the individual experiences of sexism and racism, but collectively implies that the group will be confronted with those issues as well (Collins, 1997).

Black feminism exists as a standpoint theory for African American women’s oppression. Earlier works of Black feminists determined that systems of oppression such as race, class, and gender create different standpoints among women (hooks, 1984; Collins, 2000). Black feminist standpoint theory provides an approach centered on African American women’s experiences. The standpoint theory provides a forum for African American women to construct realities and an outlet for documentation of their lived experiences.

Black feminist theories are ideologies that both aim to unveil the oppression experienced by marginalized groups and present opportunities for those groups to share about their experiences (Byrd & Stanley, 2009). A basic premise of Black feminist theories is that African American women cannot be fully empowered unless intersecting oppressions such as racism, sexism and classism are eliminated (Collins, 1990). In light of this, the existence of race, gender and social realities and experiences of African American women serves to minimize the existence of African American women as leaders (Gostnell cited in Stanley, 2006). Thus, research on African American women as leaders has been subsumed with feminist literature and these studies have not adequately documented the phenomenon of leadership development from the experiences of African American women. Lastly, research on feminist and Black feminist theories is useful in articulating African American women’s leadership experience and how the intersection of race and gender affect their leadership development.

### **Socio-cultural Theories**

Socio-cultural refers to theoretical perspectives that consider race, gender, and social class in analyzing power dynamics within bureaucratic and other systems where power can be used to oppress (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). Given that African American women are simultaneously situated within at least two groups that are subjected to broad subordinations, socio-cultural theories challenge the notion that problems can be viewed as mono-casual, or based on racial or gender discrimination (Crenshaw, 1989). Furthermore, systems of

oppression contain multiplier effects such as– racism, sexism and social classism. The marginality of African American women in predominantly White organizations experience multiplier effects in ways that cannot be understood from the experiences of other groups in these settings. Thus, from the ideology of history and culture, African American women have learned how to recognize, respond, and react to issues emerging from socio-cultural realities that have challenged their leadership experience (Stanley, 2009).

Socio-cultural theories are useful for understanding African American women’s oppression and alienation within organizations for the purpose of emancipation and social change (Creswell, 1998). In addition, socio-cultural theories are important to provide a framework for understanding how African American women’s construct and enact leadership within their professional contexts.

### **Intersectionality**

Intersectionality is a socio-cultural theoretical framework that focuses on the interlocking system of race, gender and social class (Byrd & Stanley, 2009; Davis, 2012). While the term intersectionality was coined by Kimberle Crenshaw in 1989, the concept’s origin can be traced to Maria Stewart in 1832 (Jordan-Zachery, 2007). Stewart, a Black female contemporary, articulated a critique of difference and challenged the functioning of race and gender which eventually evolved into the origin of intersectionality. Kimberle Crenshaw (1989) coined the term intersectionality and argued that race and gender interact to shape the multiple dimensions of Black women’s employment experiences (Crenshaw, 1989). Brooks (2012) stated that “slavery and residual effects left of that significant facet of American history on Black Americans is primarily why intersectionality was conceptually born out of the study of Black women and Black Feminist Thought” (p. 39).

When race, gender and social class converge, they form a dynamic, interlocking system referred to as intersectionality (Stanley, 2009). The interlocking systems of race, gender and social class give voice to African American women on encounters with intersectionality in their leadership development. Intersectionality theories provide a framework for exploration of multi-dimensional research variables and present an approach that grew out of feminist and Black feminist standpoints (Witherspoon, 2009). Intersectionality refers to the ways in which social and cultural (i.e. race and gender) constructs interact and are useful in better understanding the complexities of the dual status that African American female leaders face in the workplace (Lloyd-Jones, 2009). Research on socio-cultural issues such as intersectionality is needed to provide a deeper understanding of ways that racism, sexism, classism, ethnicity and other social realities can affect an individual’s lived experiences in the workplace (Jean-Marie, Williams & Sherman, 2009).

In intersectionality, gender differences coupled with race imbue perceptions and attitudes that contribute to the dearth of African American women at the executive level (Stanley, 2009). According to Lloyd-Jones (2009), when race converges with gender, a double standard dichotomy surfaces for African American women, thus reducing access to leadership positions and generating ambivalence about their ability to lead. Women and minorities may experience interrelated barriers that restrict advancement at the individual, group and organizational levels.

The theory of intersectionality articulates a framework for understanding the complexities of minority women's identities and experiences (Horsford & Tilman, 2011). Parker (2005) described intersectionality as a means of interpreting and analyzing the experiences that African American women encounter while holding positions of authority in predominantly White organizations. When the spheres of race, gender and social class intersect, they shape social realities and inform the multiple dimensions of the lived experiences of African American women (Parker, 2005). One's history, culture and values provide a frame of reference for making meaning of common experiences. Hence, African American women view the world from discrete perspectives based on their social positions, and within the confines of the larger social structures of race and gender (Bloom & Erlandson, 2003).

Although research literature exists on intersectionality (Stanley, 2009; Horsford, 2011; Alston, 2005; Byrd, 2009; Collins, 2003), few scholars have addressed leadership development for African American women from the perspective of intersectionality in academia. The lack of research in this discourse is critical to the professional development of leaders positioned at the intersection of race, gender and social class. Examining intersectionality in the leadership experiences of African American women offers opportunity for new perspectives of workplace values and beliefs to be heard. Research from this paradigm seeks to explore the scientific study of domination, oppression, alienation, and struggle within institutions, organizations, and social groups for the purpose of emancipation, transformation and social change (Creswell, 1998).

## Methodology

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the intersectionality of race and gender for African American women through their lived experiences of how they developed as leaders in the academy. The study employed a qualitative design, specifically the phenomenological research method that examined the lived experiences of five African American women who obtained leadership positions within academic organizations. The researcher used purposeful sampling for selecting research participants. The purposive sample of participants was selected because their ascendancy captured the lived experiences associated with the topic under investigation. The participants were selected because they were

African American women in senior leadership positions in academia. The criteria included women who were presidents, vice-presidents or deans in both four-year and two-year colleges in academia. Five African American women from five U.S. colleges were selected as the study participants. Both telephone and in-person interviews were used to conduct the interviews.

A phenomenological research method was most appropriate for this study in order to capture the lived experiences of these individuals and to develop themes that challenge structural or normative assumptions (Lester, 1999). Phenomenology is a method of qualitative research that allows researchers to unassumingly examine participants' lived experiences and steer clear of presuppositions; relying instead on the responses of the study participants (Moustakas, 1994).

Approval was received by the IRB and consent was received from each of the participants prior to their interviews. Participant responses were recorded, but identities remained anonymous and responses kept confidential. Pseudonyms were used to ensure confidentiality as well as an effort to protect the participant's identity and confidential responses by modifying any identifying information. The interview protocol questions were designed to address how race and gender informed the leadership development of African American women and were organized into five different parts that included seven main and twelve probing questions. The five categorical sections were comprised of questions focused on each individual's life history; career path; leadership; identity/intersectionality and life lessons.

All of the interview questions were designed to frame the answer to the primary research question, *in what ways did race and gender identities inform African American women leadership development experiences?* The interview protocol consisted of the following seven main questions:

1. Tell me generally about your early childhood?
2. Please describe the person(s) who taught you the most during your career?
3. How has your race and gender shaped your development as a leader?
4. What lessons have you learned as a woman in a leadership position?
5. What lessons have you learned as an African American in a leadership position?
6. What lessons have you learned as an African American woman in a leadership position?
7. What advice do you have for future African American female leaders?

### *Data Collection and Analysis*

The participants in the study responded to semi-structured, open-ended questions based on reflections of their lived experiences as African American female leaders. Moustakas (1994) explained the “method of reflection that occurs throughout the phenomenological approach provides a logical, systematic, and coherent resource for carrying out the analysis and synthesis

The researcher interviewed African American women in academia who were senior level executives. Senior level executives included presidents, provosts and vice presidents & deans. Interviews with each participant were conducted to develop themes and ceased when the interviewees refrained from introducing new perspectives on the topic. Kensit (2000) posits that “researchers are cautioned to allow the data to emerge while conducting phenomenological studies because engaging in phenomenology means capturing rich descriptions of phenomena and their settings” (p. 104). The aim of the researcher is to describe as accurately as possible the phenomenon, refraining from any pre-given framework but remaining true to the facts (Groenewald, 2004).

Through semi-structured, in-depth interviewing, the researcher was able to capture the true essence of each participant’s experience with the phenomenon under study. The qualitative, in-depth interviews were more like conversations rather than formal events with predetermined response categories (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). The researcher anticipated that the phenomenon of interest would unfold as the participants relayed their views and experiences. Marshall and Rossman suggest that the most important aspect of the interviewer’s approach is conveying the attitude that the participant’s view is valuable and useful (2006).

Researcher biases were addressed using the process of epoche. In phenomenology, “bracketing helps us to free ourselves from prejudices and secure the purity of our detachment as observers, so that we can encounter things as they are in themselves independently of any presuppositions” (Husserl, 1962, p. 163). Creswell (2007) emphasizes that qualitative researchers engage in at least two of these validation strategies in any given study. To ensure validity, the researcher utilized member checking to solicit the participants’ views of the credibility of the data so that they could judge the accuracy of the account. The use of rich, thick descriptions to describe in the participants under study was the second means of ensuring trustworthiness.

Gay, Mills and Airasian (2009) posits that the qualitative researcher begins data analysis from the initial interaction with participants and continues that interaction and analysis throughout the entire study. Moustakas (1994) modification of the Van Kaam method of analysis of phenomenological data was used as the method of data analysis for the study. Moustakas (1994) recommends that phenomenological inquiry should commence with a period of reflection in order to produce an initial phenomenological account. Throughout the

data analysis process, the researcher listened to each participant’s response to the research questions and transcribed the results from the digital recordings. The researcher analyzed transcriptions several times to capture meanings of the participants’ experiences as they related to the phenomenon.

Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting themes within data to describe information set in rich detail (Braun & Clark, 2006). From thematic analysis, patterns or themes develop that should be combined and catalogued. Themes come from both the data (inductive approach) and from our prior theoretical understanding of whatever phenomenon we are studying (deductive approach) (Bernard & Ryan, 2010).

Themes are defined as units derived from patterns such as “conversation topics, vocabulary, recurring activities, meanings, feelings, or folk sayings and proverbs” (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998, p.131). Clusters of themes are typically formed by grouping units of meaning together (Creswell, 2007). Themes are identified by “bringing together components or fragments of ideas or experiences which often are meaningless when viewed alone” (as cited in Aronson, 1994, p. 1). It is critical that the researcher carefully examine the themes that emerge from the participants’ stories. By carefully examining the data, themes are pieced together to form a comprehensive picture of the participants’ collective experiences. Constat (1992) reiterates this point and states that the “interpretative approach should be considered as a distinct point of origination” (p. 258).

### **Findings and Interpretation of the Results**

The themes which emerged from the experiences of how these African American women developed as leaders were explicated from the text of the five participants in the research study. The women in the study confirmed that race and gender informed their development as leaders in academia. Throughout the interviews, all of the participants made statements that described how the intersection of race and gender affected their leadership development and career trajectories.

#### **Theme 1: Predestined for success.**

The importance of family resonated with the early childhood experiences of most of the participants in this study. Most of the African American women hailed from a tradition where family and extended family were extremely valued and influential in their lives. The women in the study commonly referred to parents and family members who provided strong guidance and support that profoundly impacted their development as leaders. Williams and Stockton (1973) states that it is in the family where personality is developed, identity is formed, status is assigned, and basic values and norms are learned. It became apparent that these African American women possessed certain qualities that can be attributed to their childhood rearing. Many of the women expressed that their ability to become successful, maintain integrity, demonstrate

confidence and remain resilient were developed by a strong foundation from family members.

Through their early experiences, these women expressed that they had the tenacity to forge ahead and become successful. There was something remarkable in the minds of these African American women that they knew they had to succeed and beat the odds. Family and early experiences were integral in planting the seeds for cultivating their desire to become leaders. The women learned that the role their parents and families played in instilling confidence in them at an early age, was integral in laying a foundation for them to achieve and believe in themselves; even when they faced adversity, their early exposure to self-pride and self-reliance enabled them to succeed in difficult situations. By growing up in environments that had a strong legacy of survival, determination and discipline, these African American women had been instilled with the characteristics that predestined them for success.

The following excerpts from the participants' narratives provide reflections on their early childhood experiences:

Participant #1:

I can remember sitting on the edge of my aunt's bed and she said, 'well, you know that there is more than one kind of doctor. You can be a doctor of education which my family were all educators. The women in my family were teachers. At one of my family reunions, we had six women who had Ph.D.'s in that group. One of my cousins was a State Senator for California. So that really struck a chord in what she said and that stuck out that I really just wanted to have the title doctor. So then I went on and pursued my master's and Ph.D. in Education. Family was very important – women really.

Participant #2:

In terms of my leadership development, I didn't learn this until later until I was an adult, but my mother really instilled in me to be independent, not to rely on others. It wasn't as if no one can help you but you have to take care of you. And I think as I look back on it, I think that she always wished that she had done more with her life.

### **Theme 2: Sponsorship from the Unexpected.**

The participants acknowledged that sponsors significantly contributed to their career ascension to leadership. According to Hewlett (2013), sponsors connect you to career opportunities, make you visible to leaders to leaders within the company and provide air cover when you encounter trouble. When it comes to opening doors, they don't stop with one promotion: They'll see you to the threshold of power (Hewlett, 2013).

A unique irony encountered by these women was that many of them received sponsorship from White men. White males are often sponsors for women of color by virtue of their predominance and access to senior level positions. Since White males occupy the majority of leadership positions in organizations, they are in the position to have the decision-

making authority to provide opportunities for these women. The significant relevance underlying this relationship is that since White men occupy the seats of power in academia, the participants found themselves developing strategic mechanisms to navigate career advancement. Scholars note that having a White male as a sponsor has an obvious advantage since White men have greater access to networks of power (Giscombe, 2007). Some of the women received sponsorship from Black males who had a direct connection to White male supervisors or had the power to advance their careers. In reflecting upon their career experiences, the participants described how relationships with sponsors influenced their career advancement.

Participant #3 describes her experience as follows:

A mentor gives you some advice and talks to you about some issues and walks you through something, but they never give you anything in terms of a position or opportunity. A sponsor sticks their neck out for you and advocates in a way that a mentor does not. A sponsor will actually give you a career opportunity and advocate for your promotion and create a position for you. Whatever the case may be. I started to pay attention to that. This white man started creating opportunities for me since he held a vice president position. In the end, this sponsorship impacted me indirectly and directly in a positive fashion because there were other people at the college who were trying to block my promotion.

Mentoring and sponsorship by males was prominent in the experiences of these African American women as they recognized that sponsorship was vital to their career advancement and provided support in their professional growth and development. The participants expressed that the sponsors often provided guidance, professional mentoring and upward career mobility. Sponsorship from unexpected individuals was heralded as a key element of the success that these women attained.

### **Theme 3: Double jeopardy of race and gender.**

Intersectionality denotes the various ways in which race and gender interact to shape the multiple dimensions of Black women's employment experiences (Jordan-Zachery, 2007). For the African American women in the study, almost of all of them felt the impact of both race and gender discrimination in their careers. The combination of race and gender for African American women still hinders the potential for their ascension to senior-level positions.

Race and gender are interlocking social constructs and are not separate entities that intersect, but are completely bound to one another, incapable of being separated (Collins, 1990). Feelings of race and gender bias resonated with all of the participants as they discussed intersectionality in the workplace. For these women, race did not trump their gender, nor did gender trump their race. In their development as leaders, they faced a double jeopardy despite their leadership abilities. When Participant #3 reflected on a situation that she encountered with a White male

colleague, she discussed how she felt disrespected by this experience. As she stated,

The only overt thing that I have experienced as a woman as far as the work environment was being talked over a couple of times by White men. I was talking in the middle of a sentence and he just started talking. I was so surprised that it happened that I had to check myself and ask did that really happen. The next time he does it, it is going to be a problem. So we get into a meeting several months later, now I am being nice and I got a very good memory. So we are in this meeting and we are talking about something and I am in the middle of a sentence and then he starts talking. So the guy starts talking and I continue to talk. He got slightly louder and I got louder. I have a deep voice so I got louder and drowned him out. Then when he stopped talking, I said, 'Yes I thought I was still talking.' Then he says, 'Well, I'm sorry I didn't realize.' So, I said, 'As I was saying.' He never did that to me again.

In describing her experience as being the only African American woman in senior leadership, Participant #4 shared how she dealt with the situation.

Now getting back to that intersectionality, I don't know if it's personality, my personality because I told you I was pretty anal and compulsive, or if it's my gender, race or all of the above. But, I do think for whatever reason that I have to work harder than everyone as a cabinet member sitting at the table because some of the things that they do as my colleagues and they get away with, I wonder how do they get away with that. For a long time, I was the only female vice president on the cabinet. I have to be conscious of that because when I'm in that room, if I don't speak out then I won't get a word in edgewise.

African American women in leadership positions experience a profusion of race and gender stereotypes. For the African American participants in the study, their race and gender had negatively affected their careers. Some of the participants reported experiences of being invisible, voiceless, discriminated, isolated, undermined, treated unfairly, oppressed, challenged and demoted. These negative experiences of race and gender discrimination seemed to dominate the conversation when the participants reflected on their past experiences.

Cooper (1998) argued that

Black women, restricted from directly participating in many facets of political, economic and social life, and ignored by White men, but also by Black men and White women, have a unique perspective that, if heard, would benefit not just Black women but all of society. (p. 117)

The strength, fortitude and determination that defined these African American women demonstrated their ability to rise above adversity and forge ahead into leadership roles.

#### **Theme 4: Learn how to play the game.**

Bell hooks (1994) argued that "Black women must recognize the special vantage point our marginality gives us and make use of this perspective to criticize the dominant racist, classist and

sexist hegemony"(p. 15). The influential networks in almost all organizations are usually composed solely of men and access to these networks is often difficult to penetrate. The study's findings reinforced that African American women faced exclusion from informal social networks and did not have card-carrying memberships to the "good old boys" club. However, the study participants confirmed that securing sponsors who were willing to advance their careers, provided opportunities for their career advancements. These sponsors were often White men who were the decision makers and had positions of authority in the organization.

Women regard work more holistically, but must be aware that many times their decisions are not going to be compatible with the male dominated business culture (Evans, 2000). Thus, women must know and understand the rules and leverage the playing field to their advantage. Study findings showed that African American women learned to identify how the internal politics operated and developed strategies to decipher the organizational bureaucracy. By learning how to play the game skillfully, these women learned how to become politically savvy and navigate around potential organizational landmines. All of the African American female leaders felt that while playing the game they would never lower their standards, would always maintain integrity and never compromise their ethics.

As African American women in the workplace, the participants understood the difference between how the "man" played the game and how they should play it. The participants expressed that the playing field was not level; however, they need to sit and remain at the table in order to make their presence known.

Participant #1:

I am the only female vice president on the cabinet but now we have another woman who is general counsel. There is also the senior advisor to the president, but that is a rotating position, but I am the only female vice president. And it's funny because my husband will say to me you always talking on top of me and you never let me finish. I have to be conscious of that because when I'm in that room, if I don't speak out then I won't get a word in edgewise.

Participant #3:

They often need to come forward with professionalism and that they have to do more and be at the table and to have those discussions and to take on those roles sometimes. One bias that I have experienced in a meeting because I may be the only one or two woman in the room, but when it is asked to take notes, somehow the looks always come to me or the other woman like we are the only ones in the room who are capable of taking notes. It is those little subtle things that happen. Even if you are the leader in the room and happen to be a woman, it is amazing how this type of thing continues to happen. And for me, my gender has been the critical piece in my career. It has caused me to think that I am

not just a Black woman. I am Black woman serving in a certain position in a college. Your responsibility changes because it is not just about me. It is also ensuring that they see other women like me who can do the work and to better, improve, and be a leader in all of that. You try to fight the struggle for other women as well.

Participant #5:

As an African American woman in a leadership position, we need to recognize that there is a game. There is the same old game being played, just with different pieces. We are victims of the race card. Just like we have benefited from the race card we are also victims of it. People who have these -isms ideas, really move from one group to the next. It is like okay, we are tired of y'all. We are going to empower a different group of people and this is going to be disadvantageous to you.

#### **Theme 5: Pay it forward.**

According to Catalyst (2010), research shows that a lack of mentoring opportunities is a frequent barrier to advancement for women and people of color. This research study showed that African American women recognize the vital role of mentoring other African American females, but not enough mentoring relationships are established to prepare African women for leadership roles. By paying it forward, the experiences of African American women senior leaders could provide a roadmap for African American women aspiring to advance to senior leadership roles in academia.

Participants emphasized the importance of providing guidance to other African American females to add value to the growth and success of future African American women leaders. Participant #5 expressed that "Mentoring is crucial to how we can sustain and increase the number of women in these positions. These women should not be only at Historically Black Institutions either. They need to be at the predominantly White institutions, at the White house, or all segments of society and not be pigeon holed to working in one specific environment."

The experience of each participant could serve as a basis for programs designed to help young African American women starting their careers to have a smoother journey up the career ladder.

#### **Implications for Practice**

Understanding the leadership development experiences of African American women in the academy is necessary for improving leadership development opportunities for them as emerging leaders. The facts still remain the same, in that African American women are not represented in leadership positions in academia. According to the American Council on Education's (2012) national data in 2012, 87% of U.S. college presidents both male and female were White. Out of that number, women made up 26% of all college presidents. Of the

women college presidents across the nation in 2011, 81% were White and only 8 percent were African American (ACE, 2012). Results from the current study, further substantiate the need for more women of color in academia, especially in leadership positions. It also exposes some of the barriers faced by African American women and might also provide an understanding of the experience of African American women and the contributions of these women as a collective group in executive positions.

Since research on the impact of race and gender on African American women's leadership development in academia is understudied, this study could provide a framework for understanding their experiences. It can also serve as a reference point for those who seek to eliminate cultural barriers and obstacles that stunt the upward mobilization of African American women in their organizations.

The African American women who demonstrated resilience, integrity, intrapersonal characteristics, and social skills were more likely to climb the career ladder within their respective organizations, with the support of a mentor and/or sponsor. Thus, African American women who aspire to become leaders must be willing to step outside their comfort zones to establish a network of people who are different from them and who hold higher rank or positions. Establishing strategic relationships in the academy is a valuable tool for African American women to gain access to higher-level promotions and career opportunities.

#### **Conclusion**

The focus on the inquiry process is on understanding how individuals construct and interpret their own personal experiences (Ken, 2007). Organizations, researchers, scholars and practitioners may use the findings of the study by focusing on the theoretical framework on intersectionality as it addresses race and gender in organizations and leadership practices (Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1989). The study of intersectionality is urgent because it allows researchers to go beyond the individually informed perspective that they inevitably bring to scholarship and science (Shields, 2008). Walker (2003) points out that "the attempt to understand intersectionality is, in fact, an effort to see things from the worldview of others and not simply from our own unique standpoints" (p. 991). In essence, intersectionality articulates a politics of survival for African American women.

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