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Learning From the Lived Experiences of African American Senior Executives In Fortune 500 Organizations: A Transcendental Phenomenological Study of Black Corporate Trailblazers

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Learning From the Lived Experiences of African American Senior

Executives in Fortune 500 Organizations: A Transcendental

Phenomenological Study of Black Corporate Trailblazers

By

Otis Gregory Jarvis

A Dissertation Presented to the
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This dissertation was submitted by Otis Gregory Jarvis under the direction of the chair of the dissertation committee listed below. It was submitted to the Halmos College of Arts and Sciences and approved in partial fulfillment of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Conflict Analysis and Resolution at Nova Southeastern University.

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Dedication

This work is dedicated to my three sons, Tyler, Alexander, and Zachary. You are my inspiration. Always remember, never give up. Education is a journey not a destination. Keep your head up, eyes front, and keep moving forward. Failure is only when you give up! Fight, Fight, Fight!!! Love always wins. To all my Essential Friends and all who have supported me throughout the journey. Thank you, Mom. Thank you, LMEJ for your sacrifices and your support.

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Abstract

African American Senior Executives (AASE) exist as a group of American citizens who hold senior management roles in Fortune 500 organizations. AASE members are responsible for decision-making in a diverse number of industries but represent a small group of leaders in Fortune 500 organizations. The purpose of this qualitative transcendental phenomenological study was to examine the lived experiences of AASE in a Fortune 500 organization in the United States. The qualitative study examined through semi-structured interviews the experiences of eleven senior executives in Fortune 500 organizations in the United States. This phenomenological study examined how the lived experience of each AASE member influences their decision making, success as leaders, and career path**.** Transcendental phenomenological analysis approach to the study provides the researcher with an in-depth opportunity to reach the pure essence of the participants' unique lived experiences verbatim. This research study captured the rich contextual dialogue of each participant in the study and answered the central research question: What are the lived experiences of African American Senior Executives in Fortune 500 organizations in the United States? The research revealed that among the most influential contributors to the lived experiences and success of AASE were the experiences they developed through mentorship, visibility, diversity, family values, HBCU's, and self-ambition, which helped them to become successful despite the structural barriers encountered along the path.

Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

This chapter is an introduction to the literature relevant to the scope of this study and the significance of the problem. Chapter one details the background of the study, frames the problem statement, states the purpose of the study, and highlights the primary research question that the study will examine. The chapter introduces the theoretical framework that supports the study and concludes with a summary. The researcher seeks to discover and identify the most significant factors from each participant in the study that influenced the success of eleven AASE in Fortune 500 organizations revealed in the study.

Historically, Fortune 500 organizations play an intricate role in American society. Fortune 500 organizations serve as the economic engine of the United States. According to Sarath (2022), in the year 2019, the total revenue of Fortune 500 firms was 13.7 trillion or two-thirds of the US GDP. Successful organizational leaders inherit the task of managing their organization through a set of formal rules and strategies to achieve greater competitive advantage (Hitt, et al., 2017). The presence of a diverse workplace culture is important for stability and prosperity in any organization, and it allows the organization to achieve greater competitive advantage (Ayega & Muathe, 2018).

Workplace conflicts can be attributed to individual differences, and are associated with lived experiences, diversity, culture, language, gender, and customs idiosyncratic to all employees (Martin, 2014). As the workforce becomes more diverse, managers and employees evolve. Employees and managers interact in the organization with exposed lived experiences (Martin, 2014). If these differences are allowed to foster a negative environment it could lead to structural barriers prevailing and disrupt the harmonious

relationship between employees and managers (Rahim, 2011). These types of conflicts manifest into interpersonal conflicts and eventually organizational conflicts (Rahim, 2011). Today, a very successful organization has few choices if they plan to remain competitive and one of those choices is to become a culturally diverse organization.

A culturally diverse workforce increases the opportunity for a more creative and innovative working environment (Martin, 2014). Successful organizations experience greater profits when they hire employees with diverse cultural backgrounds (Balakrishnan et al., 2023). Research scholars suggest that more diversity in the workplace has the potential to increase interpersonal and culturally specific conflicts in Fortune 500 organizations (Martin, 2014). Conflict is inevitable in a multi-cultural organization (Inegbedion et al., 2020). American business organizations are developing a global path across the world in search of gaining competitive advantage and differentiating their business practice in developing countries (Peng, 2017).

Organizational conflicts sometimes create a culture of destructive behaviors in organizations (Deng et al., 2023). When constructive policies are implemented in an organization a greater focus from corporate leadership is inevitable and can add support for the move towards a more diverse workplace. The BLM movement initiated constructive conversations about diversity in the workplace. The BLM protest forced American corporations to look inward on current diversity policies and speak out against racial injustice. Then many of these organizations began to establish endowments to help African American students pay for college support cultural diversity projects (Balakrishnan et al., 2023).

After the George Floyd incident, several of the largest publicly held organizations in the United States issued statements condemning the tragedy and collectively raised billions of dollars to support racial inequalities and partnered with their foundations (Edgecliffe-Johnson & Rogers, 2021). The United States is a far more culturally diverse nation than it has been any other time in the history of the nation (Cornelius, 2013). One of the focuses of Fortune 500 organizations business strategy for Fortune 500 organizations consists of the implementation of DEI programs centered around recruitment of underrepresented people (Balakrishnana et al., 2023). The focus of Fortune 500 organizations is to exceed their annual strategic focus goals which includes a plan to implement changes such as diversity, equity, and inclusion. According to the research, significant progress to improve the hiring and promotion of minority employees from middle-management level, the senior executive level, all the way to the C-suite would be to make it part of the overall organizational goals (Zweigenhaft, 2013).

The knowledge that is needed to become successful as a senior executive is knowledge specific to each organization's core competencies (Donate & Pablo, 2015). According to the research, African Americans and other underrepresented groups are overlooked for open leadership positions because they often reach structural barriers that prevent them from reaching their goals of attaining a leadership position. (Beckwith et al., 2016). A "glass cliff" represents a situation where African American managers are given higher risk and challenging opportunities that are unattainable to meet (Sabharwal, 2015). In Fortune 500 organizations, reaching the goal above average returns is considered a successful business strategy for managers. Organizations business strategy hinges on achieving an above average returns and maintaining a competitive advantage

within the industry (Hitt et al., 2017). Recent research shows a competitive advantage may be achieved with an all-inclusive workforce, and this is why it is necessary for a group of diverse leaders in every organization (Festekjian, 2014).

Recent studies have shown that the pipeline of underrepresented people is increasing into higher ranking roles, and this is a benefit to the nation (Davis & Moldonado, 2015). The contributions of AASE are sometimes marginalized, and this disposition can shut the door from any opportunity for AASE to ascend the corporate ladder making it unattainable for most.

When structural barriers such as racial discrimination are prevalent in organizations, they can create an impediment for African Americans and other underrepresented minorities trying to move up the Fortune 500 leadership.

Background of the Study

In 1961, President John Fitzgerald Kennedy announced the Executive Order 1092 (Greene, 2019; Bendick & Nunes, 2012). The order proclaimed equitable employment practices toward African Americans and other races (Greene, 2019: Bendick & Nunes, 2012). The Executive Order 10925 calls for all federal contractors to provide equal treatment to all applicants without regard to race, color, creed, religion, sex, or national origin (Greene, 2019; Ray, 2014). However, employers continued to reject Black workers seeking employment. The continued racial bias in hiring practices led to the 1965 Executive Order 11246 by President Lyndon Baines Johnson. It guaranteed the same opportunity for non-white people in hiring, recruiting, or training by federal contractors (Greene, 2019; Ray, 2014). The EEOC reported that 72,675 discrimination lawsuits were filed against employers in 2019. In 2021, there were 61,331 employee-related cases filed

with the EEOC, with damages exceeding 34 million dollars (Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 2022).

History of African American Leadership in Fortune 500 Organizations

African Americans are defined as American citizens of African ancestry, (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). Some are the direct descendants of the African enslaved people brought to America and others are Americans with Black African ancestry and other people from African origins living in America. A review of the existing literature on AASE did not produce a significant amount of research, specifically on AASE leadership in organizations. African Americans do not exist as a monolithic group, yet little is known about their experiences as leaders. African Americans are part of a minority group within the United States who have lived a controversial but rich history as part of the original American cultural experience. Fortune 500 organization leaders are chosen because of their integrated set of skills and their reputation as effective executive leaders. They develop most of their management skills by progressing through the ranks, primarily dominated by European American males (Domhoff, 2014). In today's organization, leaders are required to train and develop essential skills to be effective as an executive. To be granted an opportunity one must be aware of the organizational rules most of which are determined by the stakeholders of these organizations – primarily, in a Euro-centric American dominated system (Domhoff, 2014).

To date, significant studies do not exist specifically detailing the lived experiences of African Americans as Fortune 500 organizational leaders. The "Fortune 500" is a list of the 500 largest companies in the United States according to Fortune (Wahba, 2021). Dr. Clifton R. Wharton, Jr. was the first Black executive to hold a CEO position in a

Fortune 500 organization. After about eight years, Franklin Raines became the second. Since the inception of the Fortune 500 list, only 22 African American executives have held positions of CEO. At the time of this research, only five African Americans hold CEO positions in a Fortune 500 organization. In the past two years, there were several appointments of African Americans to board positions; however, several of those appointed have since resigned for reasons that are unclear.

In the 2018 U.S. Census Bureau the research data showed European American men were at the helm of over 69.2% of the leadership positions in most companies. In the context of gender, Paustian-Underdahl et al. (2014) study found that participants considered African American men to have more leadership traits and ability than an African American woman. Since 2009, a total of four African American women have held CEO positions beginning with Ursula Burns at Xerox in 2009, and more recently on May 21, 2022, Thasunda Brown-Duckett, with TIAA. Consequently, African American representation in the Fortune 500 organizations as executives have declined and there are no minority-owned companies in the Fortune 500 ranking (Wahba, 2021).

African American senior executives have fewer opportunities to advance beyond the staff level than do European Americans **(**Paustian-Underdahl et al., 2014). Structural barriers still exist for African Americans and remain a challenge today (Domhoff, 2014). The senior executive level leadership opportunities in Fortune 500 organizations for African Americans candidates, is often determined by how well they can navigate through the structural barriers that have existed for African Americans before and after the Civil Rights Act of 1965 (Greene, 2019: Ray, 2014). AASE are equally professionally qualified to advance if given the opportunity (Domhoff, 2014).

Statement of the Problem

The problem statement is a key component of a qualitative phenomenological research study. The researcher's justification for conducting the study is embedded in the problem statement (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The researcher chose to conduct this qualitative study to bring focus and awareness to the disparity in the number of African American senior executives in Fortune 500 organizations. One of the goals of this study was to put the spotlight on the topic and bring more awareness and improve opportunities for AASE to excel at all levels in Fortune 500 organizations. The problem statement for this research study stems from the need to gain a better understanding of the lived experiences of AASE in Fortune 500 organizations, to fill the current gaps in the research, and to place more focus on *What it is like to be an African American senior executive in Fortune 500 organizations in the United States.*

The purpose of the study was to learn from the lived experiences of AASE in the study. Traditionally, the executive level or enterprise leaders exist in organizations as a unique group of individuals in the top leadership roles within corporate organizations and they are primarily responsible for corporate governance and overall organizational business strategy (Hitt et al., 2017). Some AASE are in mid-level management roles and other executive level leadership areas throughout Fortune 500 organizations. Approximately 300 African Americans serve as executives in Fortune 500 organizations (Wahaba, 2021). Although African Americans have slowly ascended to the top of the corporate ladder, they have a vital role in the evolution of the American economic system since the inception of the American labor workforce (Kurtulus, 2016).

African American executive leaders have successfully created wealth for investors and the shareholders of a vast number of organizations. Despite having proven successes and accomplishments in Fortune 500 organizations, African American employees are impacted by racial stereotypes, receive little mentoring opportunities, feel isolated and segregated at work, are relegated to irrelevant tasks, and often experience unconscious biases, and microaggressions in the workplace (Koenig & Eagly, 2014). The Civil Rights Act of 1964 has done little to curtail the total admonishment of discrimination, microaggressions, and stereotyping African Americans experience in the post-segregation workplace because race is now used as an employment prerequisite to meet compliance requirements (Skrentny, 2013).

One of the goals of the study was to fill some of the current gaps in the research on AASE in Fortune 500 organizations. Another goal was to make a new contribution to the field of conflict analysis and resolution. Third, this research may also provide corporate executive level professionals ways to improve the dialogue between African American leaders and Fortune 500 organization leaders. The qualitative approach methodology to the study using phenomenological analysis provides the researcher with an opportunity to evoke the details directly from the source, in their own words (Smith et al., 2022). Studying complex lived experiences and relationships among individuals or in groups creates a wealth of data that could benefit our whole society. A qualitative approach to the study gives the researcher a more rigorous path to examine the detailed experiences of the participants.

Existing research on workplace studies is that African American and other minority employees are seeking more empowerment and visible representation in Fortune

500 organizations. The interviews provided unique perspectives from eleven subjects in diverse industry areas of Fortune 500 organizations. We can learn from the lived experiences of the eleven AASE. The researcher's focus when conducting the study was to identify common themes among the eleven AASE from their everyday lived experiences as corporate leaders and trailblazers.

According to the Gurchiek (2021), one of the most significant trends in Fortune 500 organizations is the growing complexity of these organizations' diversity, equity, and inclusion practices. African Americans and other minority groups are under-represented in leadership and influential positions at the enterprise management level at Fortune 500 organizations (Gurchiek, 2021). According to a 2022 study conducted by the Executive Leadership Council (ELC), the number of African Americans in executive-level board positions was less than 9% of the total other leaders in all Fortune 500 organizations (Barthwell, 2022). AASE and other minority groups were and still disproportionately under-represented on Fortune 500 organizations corporate boards.

What the research revealed may bring new perspectives and support to the current initiatives for diversity, equity, and inclusion in Fortune 500 organizations. For instance, 41 % of African American Women were interested in executive leadership and only 29% of White Women had the same interest in promotion (Saddler & Thomas, 2020). Separating African Americans by gender, 24% of African American women were said to receive sponsorship and build relationships with key potential supporters and 59% had no interactions with senior leaders in the workplace (Saddler &Thomas, 2020).

In a 2020 study, 67% of Black men compared to 55% White men confirmed that they had a very high ambition and drive to be successful (Spriggs et al, 2020). The study

further revealed that Black men are motivated to succeed by financial gains and take care of their families. Although Black men cultivate their childhood, collegial relationships frequently and develop good networks, this does not seem convert to the corporate environment (Spriggs et al., 2020). Being a Black man in Fortune 500 organizations is a rocky path surrounded by structural barriers. According to the ELC study in 2020, a mere 39 % of Black men at a large organization believed they were mutually respected for their authority and only 43% felt their contributions were valued in the organizations (Spriggs et al, 2020).

This is a research problem that needs to be addressed because Fortune 500 organizations are proactively engaged in the global market ecosystem, where a more diverse and inclusive workforce already exists. Fortune 500 organizations must respond to the challenges and make constructive efforts continuously improve existing policies by implementing significant changes to the organizational culture, hence, specifically preventing the practices that encouraged the current lack of diversity in organizations. Since the rise in Social Justice awareness stemming from the death of George Floyd, more Fortune 500 organizations have signaled they have an interest to implement new policies to cultivate and foster equity and fairness in the organization hiring practices for minority people. (Barthwell, 2022).

These changes are the result of calls for advocacy and social reforms following the death of George Floyd and Brianna Taylor in Louisville Kentucky and the unforeseen dynamic in the economy due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In a Stanford University's study of Fortune 100 companies, the research showed 26 of the top Fortune 100

companies had no ethnic diversity in leadership positions and few had racially diverse executives (Larker & Tayan, 2015).

The author navigated through the participant interviews with questions that examined, guided, and identified each AASE to find their authentic voice. The lived experiences of AASE represent the authentic voice identified in the study. The interviews took place in the best possible natural environment with a series of open-ended, semi-structured questions to guide the interviews.

This study examined the pure essence of eleven AASE in Fortune 500 organizations. This study may give new insights into ways to improve structural barriers and give more focus on diversity and inclusion, mentorship and sponsorship, recruitment and retention, training, development, and promotion in Fortune 500 organizations. The author hopes this research may serve as an instrument for leaders trying to find new ways to resolve interpersonal conflicts and organizational conflicts that manifest as economic loss and human capital tensions for Fortune 500 organizations (Dana, 2001).

This research study focused primarily on the lived experiences of eleven AASE participants and gave a personal account of each. This study established connections among lived experiences, organizational conflict, and leadership in the workplace. Managing conflicts in organizations is an interactive process which requires real world resolutions. Organizations must actively manage to resolve interpersonal conflicts and make leadership decisions as they relate to organizational conflicts (Rahim, 2011). In large settings such as Fortune 500 organizations, the AASE's voice is the minority. This may leave organizations struggling to improve the relationship with the underrepresented minority employees and the organization. The phenomenological approach to the

research provided the participants with the opportunity for their voices to be heard verbatim.

One way to achieve the research study goal of getting to the essence of the participant's experiences is to conduct in-depth interviews. A sample of eleven African American men and women senior executives with a minimum of five years of work experience in any Fortune 500 company was taken. The researcher took every step to carefully preserve and transcribe the detailed notes and data collected on the lived experiences of each participant in the study. As the primary research instrumentation, the interview process of phenomenological analysis examined the lived experiences of each participant in the study through their words and the interviewer's lens. The research provided a framework for the study and examined the eleven AASE with the intent to find a new phenomenon that represents their unique perspectives.

Despite achieving success and accomplishments, African American employees are viewed by racial stereotypes, feel isolated and segregated, and some experience unconscious biases in the workplace (Koenig & Eagly, 2014). Although legislation exists to prevent such inequities, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 has done little to curtail the different forms of discrimination such as microaggressions and stereotyping of African Americans. These are still experienced in 21st-century workplaces. The qualitative approach using phenomenology provides the researcher with an opportunity to evoke the details directly from the source (Smith et al., 2022). When studying complex lived experiences and relationships between individuals or groups, a qualitative approach gives the researcher a more rigorous path to examine the details expressed by participants.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to examine the lived experiences of African American Senior Executives (AASE) in Fortune 500 organizations in the USA. The focus of the study was on the spoken words about their experience living as AASE's in Fortune 500 organizations. The phenomenological analysis is the best way to achieve the researcher's objective because it affords the researcher to examine the "pure essence" or obtain rich, and detailed descriptions from the participants, in their own words (Smith et al., 2022).

The transcendental phenomenological methodology approach to this study gave the researcher a unique opportunity to obtain data from the participants through the discovery of the firsthand events that shaped each participant's lived experiences as a senior executive in their organization (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Qualitative phenomenology requires the participants to look at things openly and undisturbed in the natural world (Moustakas, 1994). This study will add relevant and new research that may be put into practice in a Fortune 500 organization. A total of eleven African American senior executives consented to participate and were interviewed for this study. Another goal of the study is to generate new scholarly research, and bring greater awareness, and new dialogue for underrepresented employees in Fortune 500 organizations.

Research Question

In the development of research questions in a qualitative research study, it is important to narrow the focus and provide a blueprint for the study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The researcher must determine what is already known about the problem, what questions the researcher will answer about the problem, and what the future implications

are for research in this problem area (Terrell, 2016). The research question (RQ) that guides the study is: *What are the lived experiences of AASE in a Fortune 500 organization in the United States?*

Research questions are the starting point for good research methodology (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Once the researcher has developed a narrowly focused research question, the literature will sound with greater detail (Terrell, 2016). The data collected focused on the daily lived experiences of the participants in the study. Therefore, the methodology was guided by the central research question, which focuses on the lived experiences of the eleven participants: men and women AASE in Fortune 500 organizations in the United States.

A qualitative phenomenological analysis method gives the researcher a lens to examine the lived experiences of each participant in the study. The research question was directed to the sample population to find a better understanding and give more meaning to the study. The researcher made use of an open-ended interview question so the participants would provide rich dialogue and give the researcher a unique and rare opportunity to experience their lived experiences in their own words.

Definitions of Terms

The definition of terms within the study is included in this section and may help to give a better understanding. The definition is to explain as it is used in the context of this study verbatim. The terms are used throughout the study to describe the context of the term as it is represented in the study.

African American Senior Executive: A person of African descent who holds a managerial or a position of authority in a Fortune 500 organization.

Diversity: An organizational culture that consists of employees of different races, cultures (Buttner et al., 2012).

Fortune 500 Organization: A publicly held organization in the United States that is one of the 500 most profitable organizations on an annual basis.

Glass cliff: Refers to a situation where African American managers are given higher risk and challenging opportunities that are unattainable to meet (Sabharwal, 2015).

HBCU: A Historical Black College and University founded privately and publicly to serve the African Americans students during the late 1800's (Seymour & Ray, 2015).

Interpersonal Conflict: Interpersonal conflicts result from differences in needs between parties in conflict (Hocker & Wilmot, 2017). To resolve interpersonal conflicts consideration must be given to the opposing parties' feelings, beliefs, expectations, and background (Hocker et al., 2021).

Leadership: Leadership is defined as the ability to empower people to manage and create strategic change as necessary (Hitt et al., 2017).

Lived Experiences: The experiences an individual's lifetime of occurrences from birth to death. (Smith et al., 2022).

Mentoring: Mentoring a relationship between two or more people where a senior employee guides and offers guidance, insights, and wisdom to a junior protégé (Rutti et al., 2013; Craig et al., 2012)

Minority: A subordinate groups whose members have significantly less control or power over the individual's personal life than do the members of a dominant or majority group (Song, 2020).

Organizational Conflict: A breakdown in the dynamic decision-making process rendering members of the organization to choose an alternative decision that conceptualizes the root of organizational conflict (Rahim, 2011).

Senior Executive: An executive is a person holding managerial authority in a business organization. Executives are also leaders in the organization (Cook & Glass, 2014).

Theoretical Foundation

In qualitative research, the process of theorization and exploration of context is to provide a comprehensive understanding of a phenomenon (Jabareen, 2009). The theoretical framework of this study presents and examines the three dominant theories in the study. First is interpersonal conflict theory. Second is organizational conflict theory. Third is leadership theory. The theoretical framework is used to support a connection to conflict studies if any, with the participant's lived experiences as an AASE in a Fortune 500 organization in the United States. The lived experiences of African American corporate leaders have not been frequently researched. The theoretical frameworks will be supported with past qualitative and quantitative research, multi-discipline scholarly articles and journals, books, and current and past research.

Interpersonal Conflict Theory

Humans have the natural desire to have some connection to others from the time they are born (Luyten & Blatt, 2013). According to Hocker and Wilmot (2017), individuals develop the ability to cope and coexist in relationships early in life. The development of an internal maturation process determines an individual's ability to foster a healthy interpersonal relationship (Orehek et al., 2018). Interpersonal conflicts result

from differences in needs between parties in conflict (Hocker & Wilmot, 2017). To resolve interpersonal conflicts consideration must be given to the opposing parties' feelings, beliefs, expectations, and background (Hocker et al., 2021).

Organizational Conflict Theory

When conflict is identified in the workplace it creates a disruptive and destructive environment. The organizational culture inside a Fortune 500 company establishes the identity of the firm internally and externally (Rahim, 2011).One of the goals of managers is to eliminate the potential for long-term conflict in the organization. Conflicts neglected by management in the workplace may lead to unconstructive behaviors by employees and sever the ability for a leader to manage these relationships.

AASE are a small number of executives in Fortune 500 organizations, but as key members of the leadership team, AASE are responsible for making critical leadership decisions in the organization. The culture, and identity of the firm is represented through the core competencies. As leaders in an organization, AASE must exemplify these core competencies. Further, AASE experience conflicts in the workplace, as all employees do. Organizational conflicts are inevitable. All leaders including AASE need to be developed and trained to respond to conflicts in the workplace. Harmful workplace relationships create a disruption for the entire system and can prevent the organization from meeting its daily strategic goals (Rahim, 2011). The opportunity to reach a successful outcome in organizational conflict is greater when the parties in dispute determine what are the expected outcomes for each party and which resources would satisfy their expectations (Rahim, 2011; Bishara & Schipani, 2009).

Leadership Theory

Leadership is defined as the ability to empower people to manage and create strategic change as necessary (Hitt et al., 2017). Good leaders, in contrast, anticipate change and envision they can manage success. An effective leader can inspire and influence the behaviors, thoughts, and feelings of the people they manage and interact with daily. Leaders who set a good personal example in the organization are imitable. Successful leaders encounter conflict whether desirable or not within their organizations (Darling & Walker, 2001). Leaders are characterized as influential people with a high degree of intellectual stimulation, who are given an enormous amount of consideration regarding what they say and have a unique ability to motivate others successfully (Jung et al., 1999).

Summary

In Chapter 1, the researcher discusses the history and significant role of Fortune 500 corporations in the American economy. The researcher gave a detailed background to support the study and further explored the history of AASE and Fortune 500 companies in America. The researcher introduced the conceptual framework for the study and examined the structural barriers that lead to conflicts in Fortune 500 organizations.

In Chapter 2, the researcher presents the literature review and shares research topic acquisition strategies, then provides a thorough review of the literature to establish a background of the study in support of the problem statement and discuss in details of the theoretical frameworks for the study. The theoretical frameworks of Interpersonal conflict, organizational conflict, and leadership theory will be explained in more in-depth in Chapter 2.

Chapter 3 represents a discussion of the researcher's chosen design, rationale, and methodology for the study. Further, the researcher selected the primary tool for collecting the data and analyzing the responses from participants' data. The researcher used purposeful sampling to recruit potential participants for this study.

In Chapter 4, the researcher reports the findings. The researcher gives an evaluation of the data, process of developing codes and emergent themes, and reports the data of each emergent theme from the participants in the study's own words (See Appendix D). The demographic data is then reported regarding the targeted population and is explained, showing the data findings to support the literature that was presented in Chapter 2.

Chapter 5 provides a detailed discussion of the interview and open-ended questions, discusses the results, details the connection between the data the participants' lived experiences and shows the connection to conflict analysis. This is followed by a conclusion statement, and the author makes recommendations based on the findings of this study. A detailed interpretation of the findings, the limitation of the study, and finally the researcher's recommendations and further conclusions of the study complete the dissertation manuscript.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The literature review provides a framework for establishing the importance of the study as well as something to compare the results of other findings as it relates to the study (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). The four types of literature reviews are integrated past research, critiques; and critiques of previous scholarly works, explanations of the intersection between related topics, and identity of the central issues in the field (Creswell & Clark, 2017). The literature review shares with readers the result of past studies that are closely related to the current study (Marshall & Rossman, 2006).

The literature review in a qualitative study has several purposes, depending on the approach to the study. The study can be phenomenological analysis, narrative research, case study, ethnographic, or grounded theory (Creswell & Poth, 2017). This literature review section begins with an overview of existing related research on the topic, relevant history, and the theories used to identify and analyze the types of conflict prevalent in the study including interpersonal theory, organizational conflict theory, and leadership theory. The chapter concludes with evidence of the theoretical frameworks that support the research in the literature review.

Conflict and the Organization

Conflicts exist in every aspect of daily human life. In Fortune 500 organizations, leaders need to address morale and organizational workplace issues by identifying and preventing potential negative confrontations. Conflict resolution scholars rigorously research and examine the collective internalized conflicts deeply ensconced within these workplaces. The research shows conflicts undermine the successful development of an individual's talents. At the time of this study, few researchers have identified areas of

interest that are critical to the study of African American senior executives in Fortune 500 organizations in the United States. This study examined the relationship between interpersonal conflict, organizational conflicts, and leadership theory as it relates to structural barriers in organizations and the intermingled paradigm that connects to AASE in Fortune 500 organizations. The interconnectivity between all these forces creates workplace conflicts which put a burden on human capital and organizational resources (Dana, 2001). The continued lack of organizational resources would inevitably reduce the ability for organizations to recruit and hire new candidates. A reduction in the workforce would have an impact on minority employees more than others because they represent a small percentage of the total employees.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework was the center of this qualitative study because structural barriers are at the core of the AASE opportunity for advancement in Fortune 500 organizations. Conceptual frameworks assist the researcher with the qualitative approach to the research to explicate the meaning of the theories to provide a comprehensive understanding of phenomena in the research study (Jabreen, 2009). This transcendental phenomenological research study made a connection between the structural barriers and the traditional organizational responses to the deficit in the advancement of African Americans in Fortune 500 organizations.

Structural Barriers in Fortune 500 Organizations

In this literature review, the researcher explains in-depth the organizational and interpersonal conflicts referred to as structural barriers as they relate to AASE, and the traditional organizational response to resolve these conflict issues in organizations.

Structural barriers are difficulties that African Americans encounter when attempting to ascend to the hierarchy within Fortune 500 organizations (Wyatt & Sylvester, 2015). Structural barriers can create disputes or dissatisfactions and infer perceived differences in leadership between African Americans and European Americans (Wyatt & Sylvester, 2015). According to the research, structural barriers are prevalent in Fortune 500 organizations. They are sometimes implicit in nature but can be significant barriers to success for African Americans (Greene, 2019). In a 2013 study, researchers reported that gender barriers for women could take another 40 years to equalize (Catalyst, 2014).

Workforce Dynamics

Workplace conflicts are common elements of the workplace and may be managed to avoid catastrophic results. Globalization and technological advances and routine changes have created more tensions in the workplace making conflicts unavoidable for managers (Peng, 2017). Organizational leaders must be prepared and trained to resolve internal turmoil to avoid costly interruptions in innovation and inefficiencies in the supply chain process. One way to achieve this objective is for organizations to implement strategies to help balance stress by offering alternative incentives to support mental health (Bishara & Schipani, 2009).

Workplace dynamics such as work life balance allows employees to balance work with home life. This is a work dynamic barrier and affects all employees forcing them to choose between work-related obligations and home life. AASE exists in significant lower numbers as compared to European Americans in Fortune 500 organizations. Workplace dynamics can impact the number of AASE promoted to hire ranks in Fortune 500 because it is a barrier for all employees.

Leadership scholars conducted research on minority leadership in corporate business organizations and found that the common barriers that prevented minorities from advancement consisted of stereotypes about tacit resources and capabilities (McCarty et al., 2005). Some of these resources are leadership roles, ability to perform at high levels in management, lack of mentors and sponsors, family responsibility, training and development, visibility, and personal biases (Wyatt & Sylvester, 2015; McCarty et al., 2005).

Organizational Culture

Culture is fluid, difficult to decipher, and affects employees' work performance (Singer, 1998). Corporate culture of any organization should resemble mutual respect and consequences- fostering a culture that exemplifies the organization's mission and vision for all. Culture is a pattern of behaviors implanted in our mental programming from birth. According to Hofstede et al. (2010), every one of us is culturally conditioned to assimilate at an early age and what a person acquires in early childhood becomes an established long-term pattern of "thinking, feeling, and acting." To change one's culture, everyone must unlearn these early established childhood structural patterns to learn something new (Hofstede et al., 2010). Culture is also a shared view of ideology, values, beliefs, assumptions, expectations, attitudes, and norms that bring a community together (Thomas & Kilmann, 1974).

Managers function as a unified force to build a bridge between people at work and the culture and play a role in shaping the organization's vision and mission, which are critical to the core competencies of the organization. Organizational culture is referred to as a set of pre-established institutionalized traditions that were once put in place by the

established leaders to control the members (Kilduff & Krackhardt, 2008). Organizations are shifting to a systematic environment that seeks to place people of diverse backgrounds, goals, and values in one cohesive and coordinated cognitive system.

According to Wallace (1970), organizational culture is expressed as a set of social constructs negotiated by organizational members to anticipate and control the cognitive diversity in an organization. Organizational culture is defined by Geertz and Fenn (1974) as a localized shared system of meaning negotiated between individuals interacting to create familiarity and a shared sense of social connections (Geertz & Fenn, 1974; Kilduff & Krackhardt, 2008).

Race, Gender, and Class Issues

Although African American men and women have gradually had success in the workforce, many ascending to the ranks of senior leadership had a limited path for AASE. Many have not achieved senior leadership positions especially AASE women (Barton et al., 2012). Women of color experience discrimination in two ways: being of a minority group and being female gender (Davis & Maldonado, 2015). The AASE experience being in the minority group and find that it is a barrier that often creates a perceived feeling of not fitting in with the organization (Davis & Maldonado, 2015). Managerial ranks in Fortune 500 organizations are defined by both race and gender, which afford fewer opportunities for African Americans to hold senior level positions. One major obstacle to career mobility for AASE is the lack of opportunity to climb up the ranks and advance their careers. African American men and women entering the organization with the goal of career development must accept the existing legacy

corporate culture established by the majority European American male dominated organization in existence for years (Sabharwal, 2014).

Discrimination

Discrimination is the differential treatment based on race that disadvantages a certain racial group with inadequate justified factors that have a differential effect (Dovidio et al., 2002). There are four types of workplace discrimination: intentional and explicit (Dovidio et al., 2002), subtle and unconscious (Dovidio et al., 2002), statistical and profiling (Fang & Moro, 2011), and institutional discrimination (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). However, most individuals' ideas of discrimination involve explicit, direct hostility expressed by the dominant group towards someone from a disadvantaged racial group. Discrimination can be the result of institutional practices and procedures rather than behaviors. Often someone may be discriminated against based on overall assumptions about the individual that are attributed to a group. According to Kurtulus (2016), some legislation has reduced discrimination considerably but, employees still report the subtle form of discrimination exist in organizations. Discrimination is costly and has a negative impact on the workforce.

Explicit discrimination happens when an exchange of verbal or non-verbal racial slurs, or disparaging racial comments create a hostile environment for a minority individual or group (Dovidio et al., 2002). Such overt discrimination disadvantages the target of the discrimination creating a hostile environment. This negative abhorrent behavior can go as far as denial of employment to the victim of the attacks (Dovidio et al., 2002). Subtle discrimination or unconscious direct discrimination is conducted by "de facto" segregation in housing, education, and jobs (Dovidio et al., 2002). *Unconscious*

discrimination is a belief system that affects the attitudes and behavior of the dominant

group against the disadvantaged group (Dovidio et al., 2002). Members of the dominant

group face an internal conflict between rejecting racial bias and accepting racial bias as

part of the dominant cultural group (Dovidio et al., 2002). *Statistical and profiling*

discrimination occurs when an organization uses overall beliefs about a group to judge

another group (Coate & Loury, 1993).

The use of statistical data to deliberately discriminate against an individual from

an underrepresented group is statistical discrimination (Fang & Moro, 2011). If the

organization believes AASE are prone to criminal records as compared to European

Americans, they deliberately try to keep AASE out of the top-level management roles.

Structural discrimination is an embedded institutional process that produces differential

race outcomes (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). An example of *institutional* discriminatory

practices occurs when a firm's hiring, and promotional practices are initiated by an

internal referral system and not by an open more universal system that offers an

opportunity for promotion to all employees, instead of a select few (Sidanius & Pratto,

1999). Overall, the spectrum of employees that a discriminated against experience a

negative impact to their personal well-being, morale, job satisfaction, and performance

(Connor & Miller, 2014).

Stereotyping

European American males are overrepresented in senior leadership positions

while African Americans are frequently passed over as a whole group (Catalyst, 2023). A

study conducted on racial groups in science and technology by DiTamaso & Parks-Yancy

(2014), found American born European Americans had greater access to beneficial

information that was performance related and were given a promotion more often than any other group. European American men were considered to have the most competence in their jobs. Women of color make up approximately, 29% of the entry level jobs that lead to senior executive level (Catalyst, 2023). African Americans are often judged by the type of position offered. The jobs offered are often below their qualified skillset (Cundiff & Vescio, 2016). African American women make up 1.1% of the Executive leaders in Fortune 500 organizations (Beckwith et al., 2016). For example, few African American women are in positions of leadership in science, technology, math, and engineering senior executive positions (Cain, 2015). Years after the Civil Rights Act of 1965, minorities continue to face inequality in social and economic environments and, African Americans are still perceived as less competent than European Americans, and are perceived to be lazy, ignorant, and stupid and expected to fail (Ashley, 2014).

Traditional Response to Structural Barriers

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

AASE are interested in the same opportunities as their non-African American colleagues. Organizations that have a more diverse staff benefit more than those with low diversity. Companies that have more diversity receive higher returns on their investments (McKinsey, 2018; Berk, 2017). African American men and women in senior executive leadership and others that are corporate board members at Fortune 500 organizations, must be placed in the pipeline to fill the open opportunities when they come available. A more diverse organization can empower employees and create a catalyst for innovation (Keathley et al., 2016). Having different cultures in the workplace means establishing

different ways to solve problems and more people to contribute to resolve conflicts offering different perspectives (Martin, 2014).

According to Ravazzani (2016), the changes in demographics of the workplace merge with the ethical expectations of conduct. The competition from the global marketplace has forced organizations to deal directly and locally with employee diversity. Diversity and inclusion promote a mentally positive work environment for employees which evolves from fostering better relationships and more positive interactions with a diverse staff (Keathley et al., 2016). Diversity and inclusion play a greater role including organizational commitment to innovation and fair treatment in the work environment (Chrobot-Mason & Aramovich, 2013).

When diversity is efficiently engaged and the workplace supports a diverse workforce, employees from all demographic backgrounds feel included within the organization (Celikdemir & Katrinli, 2020). According to Ali and Anwar (2021), the more the lines of communication exist between an employee and the manager, the more productive an employee feels, the more value the employer receives. Employees who feel valued care more about the organization in which they work (Ali & Anwar, 2021). Conversely, a less diverse work force has a negative impact when employees perceive they are not valued equally (Ali & Anwar, 2021).

The integration of a diverse and multi-cultural workforce prevents turnover and fewer incidents of harassment and discrimination complaints (Chrobot-Mason & Aramovich, 2013). This allows more employees to work to their full potential and contribute innovative skills to an organization (Chrobot-Mason & Aramovich, 2013).

Mentorships

A study by the Center for Talent Innovation (2016) found that organizations excluded African Americans and other demographic groups from key positions in the organizations and they failed to provide a sense of being valued as equal partners in the organizations. A recent study by Smith (2021), reveled it was harder for AASE women to obtain mentors as well as their very own sponsors. Mentorships can provide the AASE key opportunities for upward growth. Any AASE would benefit from having a senior leader who can provide on the job wisdom and insights and help them get through the obstacles they will encounter as leaders. The lack of mentors means AASE are slower to develop in their careers and to build the necessary relationships for long-term career development and advancement in a Fortune organization. In a study on African American women holding MBA degrees, showed they have less access to role models and mentors than European American contemporaries with MBAs (Giscombe & Mattis, 2002). The lack of visibility of AASE in Fortune 500s affects the opportunities for up-and-coming hires to receive mentoring from someone that looks like they do. Mentoring is a process that can improve the connections to networks for AASE. Diversity scholars and practitioners acknowledge the fact that challenges related to diversity and the complexity effects of demographics in organizations exist and that there is a need to improve career advancement opportunities for individuals of underrepresented groups.

One solution for improving the mentorship of African American executives in the organization is to provide cross-race mentoring. Mentoring relationships are critically important for AASE as they relate to objective measures such as promotion and compensation. Some form of bias exists in all people. As the predominant leadership

group in Fortune 500 organization, European Americans sponsors have more access to networks and resources critical to career advancement. To break through this structural barrier, African American employees must seek opportunities for mentorship from potential European American leaders who are willing to mentor all potential candidates regardless of their ethnic background (Randell et al., 2021).Today, bias and discrimination still exist in organizations, so mentorship is a critical opportunity for the AASE to achieve career advancement. There are a host of potential issues and conflicts that may arise from cross-race mentoring, but the opportunity for career advancement and increased access to new networks for AASE would far outweigh the potential identity-related challenges.

Training and Development

Some African Americans have made advancements in the workplace, through diversity, inclusion, and internal networking groups (Tamir, 2021). The African American experience in corporate workplaces is unique because of the history of discrimination in corporate America (Domhoff, 2014). Despite the changes, some AASE men and women still feel left behind in the corporate environment. According to Burt et al. (2017), African Americans in corporate work environments sometimes interpret the historical lack of advancement as overt discrimination and unfair practices.

Training builds the necessary competencies all employees need to achieve the organization's mission and performance objectives. Training is an organized set of experiences that require all employees to increase the job skills and competencies required to take advantage of new opportunities and expand their work tasks and duties, including making advances into managerial positions. Insufficient training would lead to

incompetence and inequalities in skills and opportunities. Training is a necessary part of AASE goals for advancement in Fortune 500 organizations.

Development gives the African American senior executives an opportunity to prepare and demonstrate their ability to perform the duties that make them desirable for a promotion in a leadership position. AASE, who are well trained, are ready for the next new opportunity for advancement up the ladder and eventually to the C-Suite. A key element in advancement of the AASE is to receive the same training and development as their contemporaries on the job. Training and development should be objective and transparent for all employees. A diverse pool of candidates should be selected for every opportunity to ensure all demographics are represented with an equal opportunity to advance within every organization.

Sponsorship

According to Omadke (2021), sponsors are individuals who model successful behavior, and directly create an opportunity for the mentee protégé to advance professionally. Sponsorship is a professional relationship and commitment between two parties. In a sponsorship agreement the two parties outline clearly defined roles and responsibilities and the ways the relationship will help to build a stronger work environment (Omadke, 2021). Sponsorship supports mentorship. African Americans mentees could benefit from mentorship, so sponsorships are a critical tool to help AASE succeed at a higher level in Fortune 500 organizations. Sponsorship creates an opportunity for the mentee to expand his/her visibility within the organizations (Smith, 2022). Sponsors are advocates who are totally vested in the training and development as well as the retention and promotion of their mentees.

Summary

In summary, for AASE the response to structural barriers is an important part of the overall process of promotion and advancement. For example, sponsorship provides the mentee with the necessary support and guidance that help to establish a bond and trust between the mentor and mentee and a vast potential to open the doors for opportunity. Through diversity equity and inclusion; training and development; mentorship; and sponsorship process each AASE can gain invaluable exposure to specific training and development and subsequently receive in return the direct feedback from the same people who previously navigated through the process themselves and they bring forth a wealth of firsthand knowledge and wisdom from the executive branch of the organization direct to the AASE.

Theoretical Framework

In qualitative research, the process of theorization and exploration of context is to provide a comprehensive understanding of a phenomenon (Jabareen, 2009). The theoretical framework of this study presents and examines the three dominant theories in the study. First is interpersonal conflict theory; Second is organizational conflict theory; Third is leadership theory. The theoretical framework is used to support a connection to conceptual framework , with the participant's lived experiences as an AASE in a Fortune 500 organization in the United States. The lived experiences of African American corporate leaders have not been frequently researched. The theoretical frameworks will be supported with past qualitative and quantitative research, multi-discipline scholarly articles and journals, books, and current and past research.

The literature review examined the three theories, which included interpersonal theory, organizational theory, and leadership theory. The theoretical framework in the study gives a deeper understanding and investigates the nature of the problem. The researcher studied organizational and interpersonal conflicts from three different theoretical viewpoints. This study examined and detailed how a group of African American senior executive leaders interact with functional and dysfunctional conflicts inside and outside the organizational environment. The study will further examine how these unique experiences lead AASE through diverse and complex relationships, structural barriers, and how managing those relationships and interactions helped them to navigate within the spotlights in the organizations offering them new opportunities for advancement in the organizations.

Interpersonal Conflict Theory

Humans have the natural desire to have some connection to others from the time they are born (Luyten & Blatt, 2013). According to Hocker and Wilmot (2017), individuals develop the ability to cope and coexist in relationships early in life. The development of an internal maturation process determines an individual's ability to foster a healthy interpersonal relationship (Orehek et al., 2018). Interpersonal conflicts result from differences in needs between parties in conflict (Hocker and Wilmot, 2017). To resolve interpersonal conflicts consideration must be given to the opposing parties' feelings, beliefs, expectations, and background (Hocker et al., 2021).

One idea to avoid negative conflicts between employees is to avoid poor interpersonal communication, which often is a result of cultural differences in communicating (Bowes, 2008). Another way is to create a more collaborative and

cooperative work environment where there is a chance to create value, both formal and informal. When value is created, there is a better chance to find mutually acceptable common ground (Harriott, 2014; Katz et al., 2011).

Interpersonal conflict is a dynamic intersection between two or more independent parties as they experience adverse interactions and take various positions or form different ideologies (Barki & Hartwick, 2004). Interpersonal conflict further escalates when there is interference of one party's ability to attain their goal. The underlying factors that enhance interpersonal conflict stem from the perception of the parties involved in the conflict that some adverse symptoms may result from the unification of the two sides. Interpersonal conflict results in a variety of negative outcomes, some may include difficulty interacting with others or ineffective and poor decision-making skills. AASE as leaders engage with a multifaceted number of individuals that they lead in the organization whose expectations are also determined by their personal influences. Interpersonal conflicts are inevitable in organizations and are viewed as opportunities for managers to grow. Managers are constantly challenged to grow and to manage individuals with different values from their own idiosyncratic value system.

Interpersonal conflicts reflect an attempt to communicate by exercising influence. It can be an attempt to achieve a power dynamic and how an individual intends to fulfil their needs, goals, and values interpersonally, within their organization or between colleagues (Hocker et al., 2021). Interpersonal conflict produces an overt identifiable response in a dispute between two interdependent parties with scarce resources, interdependent goals, or interference from others in achieving their goals (Hocker & Wilmot, 2017).

Organizational Conflict Theory

When conflict is identified in the workplace it creates a disruptive and destructive workplace environment (Rahim, 2011). One of the goals of managers includes the task of eliminating the potential for long-term conflict in the organization. If conflict is neglected by those in management positions in the workplace over a period, employees could develop unconstructive behaviors and sever the ability for a leader to manage the relationship between staff and management. If the relationship between the two parties becomes harmful this could create some type of disruption or organizational conflict and prevent the organization from meeting its daily strategic goals.

Organizational conflict is a breakdown in the dynamic decision-making process rendering members of the organization to choose an alternative decision (Rahim, 2020). Organizations have a key role to play by encouraging a more peaceful corporate culture and by representing a sense of cohesive group diplomacy (Bishara & Schipani, 2009). Organizational conflicts arise out of disagreements such as when the "psychological" contract between the team and the manager creates a dysfunction in the organization (Lussier & Achua, 2013; Kim et al., 2009). Executive leaders spend anywhere from one to seven hours per week trying to mediate and negotiate workplace conflicts (Lussier & Achua, 2013).

Organizational conflicts are inevitable, so leaders need to be developed and trained to anticipate organizational conflicts in the workplace. According to organizational conflict scholars, in order to reach a successful outcome in organizational conflict, the parties in dispute determined what are the expected outcomes for each party in dispute and which resources in the dispute would satisfy their expectations (Rahim,

2011; Bishara & Schipani, 2009). The organizational culture inside a Fortune 500 company establishes the identity of the firm both in its internal and external environments (Rahim, 2011). AASE are a small number of executives in Fortune 500 organizations, but as key members of the leadership team, AASE are responsible for making critical leadership decisions in the organization that represents the culture and identity of the firm.

Constantino and Merchant (1996) conceptualized conflict in the organizational context as a problem that is preventable. Organizational conflicts reflect the dissatisfaction, disagreement, or unmet expectations within organizational exchanges that are a product of unresolved conflicts (Sosa, 2019; Constantino & Merchant, 1996). In contrast, Salovey et al., (2004) emphasized the human experience with conflict in the workplace as cognitive and behavioral. Disruptions in the workplace that manifest from disagreements and disrupt the flow of work are considered organizational conflict (Sosa, 2019).

Organizational conflicts are destructive when not identified and resolved. These conflicts can be costly and impact the morale and financial outcome for a Fortune 500 organization. Leaders are not born, they are recruited, retained, fostered, and continually developed to become successful. Organizations should create an open dialogue with everyone so all employees can have access to equal opportunities. Current and future African American senior executives would benefit from mentorships, training, and consistent development to have successful careers in Fortune 500 organizations.

Leadership Theory

Leadership is defined as the ability to empower people to manage and create strategic change as necessary (Hitt et al., 2017). Good leaders, in contrast, anticipate change and envision they can manage success. An effective leader can inspire and influence the behaviors, thoughts, and feelings of the people they manage and interact with daily. Leaders who set a good personal example in the organization are imitable. Successful leaders encounter conflict whether desirable or not within their organizations (Darling & Walker, 2001). Leaders are characterized as influential people with a high degree of intellectual stimulation, who are given an enormous amount of consideration regarding what they say and have a unique ability to motivate others successfully (Jung et al., 1999).

Leaders who are well prepared to manage and know what to do when conflict arises will be more successful at resolving workplace conflicts (Preziosi, 2009). An effective leader separates themselves from unproductive leaders by adding value to decisions made. Value added leaders succeed at being more productive, producing exceptional quality, providing above average service, and controlling risk (Preziosi, 2009). A research study conducted on conflicts in organizations found managers spend a minimum of nine weeks out of the year managing workplace personal conflicts (Durbin, 2004). A leadership survey conducted in 2002 by Zigarelli, showed that 83% of managers say that resolving conflicts in the workplace is a part of their responsibility and 55% felt it was a high priority (Lussier & Achua, 2013).

According to Goleman et al. (2002), the best leaders show strong tendencies in four of six core leadership competencies: self-awareness, self-management, self-assessment,

and relationship management. Convincing arguments were made by leading researchers describing good leadership skills as an indication of the failures and successes of an organization (Lok & Crawford, 2004). Consequently, other researchers have defined leadership as a way of influencing others to understand how tasks can be accomplished and completed efficiently (Lok & Crawford, 2004).

Leadership "is a matter of influence, is a matter of inducing compliance, is a matter of a particular behavior, is a form of persuasion, is a power relation, and is a combination of these definitions" (Bass, 1990). Leadership "is a set of patterns and practices of behavior that are practiced between leaders and others to achieve goals" (Hersey & Blanchard, 1993). Exceptional leaders in organizations motivate and influence others to work harder than usual to achieve organizational goals (Schermerhorn, 1999). The interactions between leaders and followers are reflections of patterns of behaviors indicative of the overall goals of the organization (Miller & Bell, 2012). Leadership could be characterized as all the events that support, influence, and benefit that organization (Ali, 2012; Bryman, 2008). For this phenomenological research study, the concept of senior executive reflects the interactions between the leaders in corporate administrative level of management.

US Government studies conducted on male subjects, show that the average leader has one or two responses to conflict, regardless of their level of authority (Preziosi, 2009). The first typical response to conflict is to "retreat physically" using verbal or non-verbal communication" to respond to the fear or the indifference presented as conflict (Preziosi, 2009). The second response is the fight response; it is an aggressive and hostile response with a winner-take-all mindset (Preziosi, 2009).

Similar studies were conducted on female subjects in the U.S. Army and revealed a different approach to managing conflicts. Females more often than males responded by engaging in conversation as a strategy to resolve the conflict issues (Preziosi, 2009). Organizational leaders could improve productivity in the firm if they developed a response to manage conflicts earlier in their training. According to Runde and Flanagan, (2012), leaders who manage workplace conflicts successfully develop these skills early and continue to improve them through their leadership experiences. One of the most critical skills leaders can develop early in the training process is good listening skills; another is, practicing to engage in a purposeful conversation with all stakeholders in the organization (Runde & Flanangan, 2012).

Summary and Conclusions

Research shows that organizations with a more diverse workforce achieve greater success from innovative ideas and a more collaborative environment (Smith, 2022). As our society becomes more diverse, organizations will follow and transform to a more diverse workplace. Learning from the lived experiences of AASE is an important part of achieving a more diverse workforce. African American men and women have proven they are talented and capable of leading successfully. Some have acquired the business acumen necessary to be extraordinarily successful executives in various Fortune 500 organizations, as well as in government and non-governmental agencies. AASE have achieved some success in Fortune 500 organizations. However, there is still a gap in the number of opportunities for AASE in Fortune 500 organizations. Developing good mentorship and sponsorship programs internally would help to create new opportunities for senior level positions in Fortune 500 organizations.

Fortune 500 organizations are rapidly expanding, and this means there is a strong need to fill executive level leadership roles. AASE are well trained, diverse, and up to the task of working Fortune 500 organizations as leaders too. The dynamic shifts into the global marketplace in today's organizations make it an important strategy today for corporate leadership to seek a more diverse workforce. Senior executives must have certain skills that include new ways to identify and manage potential organizational threats. Interpersonal and organizational conflicts are two such threats to an organization's human capital, and if they are not given consideration as part of the overall business strategy these threats may lead to great economic loss eventually. The literature review identified the structural barriers and explained the significance of these barriers to AASE experiences as senior executives in a Fortune 500 organization. The author discussed the relationship between conflict and fortune 500 organizations and the structural barriers in Fortune 500 organizations. Structural barriers prevalent in Fortune 500 organization are workforce dynamics, organizational culture, race, gender, and class issues, discrimination, and stereotyping. Traditional responses to structural balances consist of programs centered around DEI, mentorship, training and development, and sponsorship.

Chapter 3: Research Method

Introduction

The methodology is an important part of the study because it provides a structure for how participants in the study are recruited and sampled. The methodology explains the data collection process, how data is organized and analyzed, and how the findings are reported in the study (Creswell & Poth, 2017). Qualitative research methodology is the most appropriate approach to this study because the detailed approach decreases the likelihood of the researcher's bias in the study (Ratcliff, 2008). It is critical to avoid the appearance of bias when conducting this study. The researcher's bias can enter the research study when the researcher relies solely on a perception of reality and not that of each participant's unique viewpoint (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Qualitative methodology has five qualitative methods. Transcendental is one of the five methods of qualitative research; this phenomenology method was selected as the best suited qualitative method for this study. Moustakas (1994) stated the goal is to determine what the experiences mean for each participant, how they provide a comprehensive description, and what is derived from their detailed descriptions.

The qualitative approach of phenomenological analysis focuses on examining the significant lived experiences of the participants in the study and how they make sense of these experiences (Smith et al., 2022). The methodology for a study is selected according to the research question (Yin, 2017). The research questions in this study focused on the lived experiences of the participants in the study as African American senior executives. A phenomenology approach to the study develops descriptions of experiences rather than explanations and analyses (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Yin, 2011). A qualitative study using

the phenomenological approach to guide the study was selected to best examine and describe the lived experiences of each African American senior executive leader working for a Fortune 500 organization in this study. Through a comprehensive analysis of the interviews, the researcher was able to interpret and analyze their experiences through their own words giving meaning to them. Since the research question requires data that would describe the experiences and the perceptions of the participants, the use of qualitative methodology was appropriate for this research.

Phenomenology Research

Phenomenology is a form of inquiry seeking to understand human experience by examining and exploring a phenomenon, how it is perceived, and how it is experienced by the participants within the study (Moustakas, 1994). According to the literature, phenomenological research should have a social meaning and personal significance (Moustakas, 1994). The concepts of intentionality, noema, and noesis, are central to the study of phenomenology. Noema is the external perception and noesis is the internal perception that allow for deeper meaning or the *essence* of the meaning to unfold when unified (Moustakas, 1994). The essence is the condition or value that gives meaning to the lived experiences of the African American senior executives in the study. The essence is the final *truth* according to the perceptions and intuition of the participants.

In phenomenological research, collecting and analyzing the data requires organizing and analyzing it to facilitate the development of individual textual and structural descriptions, a composite textual description, and a synthesis of textual and structural meanings and *truth* (Moustakas, 1994). According to Vagle (2018), collecting

and analyzing phenomenological data is interlaced throughout every stage of the material analysis process.

Transcendental Phenomenology

Transcendental phenomenology is the qualitative research methodology used to conduct this study and was used to explicate the participants' lived experiences. This approach is rooted in the concepts introduced by Husserl's philosophical perspectives on consciousness (1927). Husserl referred to human experiences as an *act* and that acts are intentional experiences emerging from the individual's memory of their experiences (Moustakas, 1994). The researcher conducting a phenomenological study must set aside all preconceived ideas (epochs) and conduct the study through unclouded glasses (Sheehan, 2014). The role of the participant in a transcendental phenomenological study is to reveal what they perceive as real. Blum (2012) described the role of the subject in a phenomenology study as transcendent. Conducting a phenomenology approach to this study gives the researcher the data experiences from the words of the participant's verbatim thinking and judgements and this is the primary evidence of scientific inquiry (Moustakas, 1994). The researcher chose a qualitative study and transcendental phenomenology method to conduct the research because it has systematic steps for analyzing the data and guidelines for forming contextual structural descriptions (Creswell & Poth, 2017).

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Research Design and Rationale

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A qualitative approach to the research study was used because the method is most appropriate when the researcher wants to find answers to "how," "why," or "what" questions (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The researcher in this study, collected, analyzed,

and reported the data in the study. Phenomenological research is aligned with the study of human experience whether that is of the transcendental approach of the founding father, Husserl (1927), or the "hermeneutic" phenomenology of Heidegger (1962). According to Sokolowski (2008), the object of the research is based on the perception of the individual's consciousness. The qualitative method of transcendental phenomenological analysis is used as a methodology to gain an in-depth understanding of the phenomena of each participant's lived career path. The structure of the qualitative method offered the researcher the best way to get the *pure essence* of the lived experiences during the semi-structured interviews. Each open-ended question was carefully crafted and used as a framework for each interview with the goal of explicating the data for each AASE (Yin, 2017). The qualitative methodology when used as a research study method allows the researcher to obtain more dialogue allowing participants to openly reflect and share their experiences (Patton, 2015).

The qualitative approach to the study design is used to help the researcher give new meaning and a new contribution to phenomenological research. Establishing a connection with each participant in this study was unavoidable. The researcher has prior experience working in a Fortune 500 organization over fifteen years ago and has witnessed and experienced organizational culture and conflicts in various corporate industries. This made it impossible for the researcher to enter a blank slate throughout the course of the study. Thus, the researcher took steps to bracket opinions and values, and any global view making sure not to influence the data or create bias. Careful consideration was given to the implications for the research design and conduct by the researcher retaining objectivity during the interviews and the entire research study.

Population

The target population for this study focused on individuals who identify as African Americans and hold senior executive level positions with Fortune 500 organizations in the United States. All the senior executives in the study oversee a business unit or project and have served in a senior position for a minimum of five years. Senior executives hold different titles in their roles as Fortune 500 leaders including: President (P), Vice-President (VP), Senior Vice President (SVP), Assistant Vice President (AVP), Director, and Assistant Director. These leaders serve as the head or indirect head of the units or projects critical to the day-to-day and long-term future strategy of the organizations they lead. The researcher conducted the study using the phenomenological approach of qualitative research methodology to engage each of the participants using a combination of face-to-face interviews via Zoom conferences, digital recordings, and handwritten notes for all interviews with each African American male and female participant in the study. Each participant is a current or former senior level executive in a Fortune 500 organization in the United States.

A Fortune 500 organization is a publicly held entity registered with the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC). The criterion for membership is that each company holds the distinction of being one of the Fortune 500 companies with the most valuable holdings by revenue and provides goods and services to the public. Fortune 500 organizations span all industries in business. The process of selecting and identifying participants consisted of direct contact through social media applications such as, LinkedIn, email, phone calls, referrals, word of mouth, Savoy magazine, and recruitment

through professional affinity groups and associations such as the Executive Leadership Council (ELC) website.

Sampling Strategy

The researcher conducted phenomenological interviews with eleven Fortune 500 professionals who met the criteria of an AASE. Each African American senior executive serves as a leader and is part of the leadership enterprise for a Fortune 500 organization. Three to five interviewees are sufficient to identify thematic patterns in a phenomenological study (Pollio et al., 1997). The goal of this study was to identify a diverse occupational sample of potential participants who represent all demographics and levels of corporate engagement. All participants in the study work currently or formerly in a Fortune 500 organization in America as a senior executive. During the interview, the interview questions were used to explicate the lived experiences of each participant in the research study. The researcher's goal was to listen, journal, record, and document from the participant's words verbatim.

The participants in the study were informed about the purpose and the methods of the study before attaining their voluntary involvement in the study. A rapport was established with each prospective participant, and they were each advised they may voluntarily withdraw from participation if they choose to do so, and that no adverse effects will impact them if they choose to withdraw. In this study each participant was assigned a unique identification system to ensure the confidentiality of the data obtained from each participation in the study (Creswell & Poth, 2017).

The sampling technique used in transcendental phenomenological research is purposive sampling. Purposive sampling is advantageous when conducting research using

a small size population of participants (Smith et al., 2022). Purposive sampling and the

knowledge of the researcher allows the researcher to identify a homogeneous population

such as AASE (Smith et al., 2022). This study used a selective sampling process to get

better insights into the lived experiences of the participants; therefore, it was critical to

select participants who have experienced in their professional lives as executives in

corporate organizations. The function of the sample size is to curtail data saturation due

to the high probability that the researcher's goal is to collect, identify, and analyze

similarities and differences in the data from all the participants (Smith et al., 2022). All

the computer records utilized in this research by the researcher are protected by password

encryption software with only one access, that of the researcher (Smith et al., 2022).

Through the initiating of the Zoom face-to-face semi-structured interviews, which gave

the participants in the study the choice of the location the interview would take place, the

researcher was able to introduce some change in adaptation to the environment where

they work but was able to give each participant a greater sense of safety and comfort

during the interview process.

Procedures

According to Creswell and Creswell (2018) and Creswell and Poth (2017), the

best method for collecting data in phenomenological research is using in-depth

interviews. Phenomenological researchers are required to keep the identity of participants

and the data confidential (Smith et al., 2022). A detailed explanation of the procedure

used in this study to collect, analyze, and report the findings of the data and process

concludes in the fifth chapter.

Recruitment

The recruitment process identified eleven prospective participants for this study after soliciting about eighty-five self-identified African American senior executives via social media posts, direct contact, phone calls, and referrals. According to Creswell and Creswell (2018), the chain technique helps the researcher to identify prospective participants through people of interest. The researcher designed a recruitment flyer and an email recruitment letter subject to approval by the IRB. The recruitment flyer and letter received the approval of the IRB. The researcher included a copy of the research protocol to show how the researcher recruited the prospective participant for the study (see Appendix A). The researcher provided PDF copies comprised of the research protocol, the research recruitment flyer (see Appendix B) , and the research recruitment letter to all potential participants for the study (see Appendix C). A pre-interview screening meeting was arranged with all prospective participants to discuss the research protocol.

Data Collection

Qualitative research has several advantages (Patton, 2015). The transcendental phenomenological process to the research interview requires copious notetaking and recordings of lived experiences and accounts of the participants as they speak in their own words. One advantage of conducting qualitative research is the enormous amount of data sources that give researchers the flexibility to use a combination of these sources, depending on the scope of their research (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Nova Southeastern University grants researchers the approval to conduct the research and distribute and receive informed consent forms from each

participant. According to Creswell and Creswell (2018), the next step after gaining IRB approved consent from the participants is to bracket firsthand experiences of the researcher. Bracketing requires the researcher to set aside preconceived ideas and knowledge about the experiences discovered to have a non-biased outlook on the study.

The data collection process was approved by the Nova Southeastern University IRB (IRB #2022-189) on April 14, 2022 (see Appendix B). The recruitment process started on April 15, 2022. The recruitment process included all the following: Social media business site LinkedIn, word of mouth, face-to-face, referrals, and ad-hoc recruiting. The participants in this study all met the criteria of a purposive sample as they were all African American senior executives in a Fortune 500 organization located in the United States (Smith et al., 2022). The data collection process ended on May 28, 2022, when the data yielded no new themes and became redundant; the data collection met a saturation point (Sandelowski, 2008). Data saturation occurs when a researcher acknowledges they have a profound understanding of the participants' perspective and nothing new is apparent (Seidman, 2019).

Data Analysis

In qualitative research, the researcher must be discerning when analyzing data, being careful to read all relevant materials collected. The analysis of the data is conducted by organizing the material, the data, then grouping the data into themes, categories, or processing them into codes (Billups, 2020). According to Smith et al. (2022), the central goal of reaching the essential outcome in the analysis relies on how well focused the researcher tends to be on the core experiences of the participant. An emphasis must be placed on using exploratory comments (Smith et al., 2022). The researcher's

interpretation of the data is significant to the analysis of the data. The degree of accuracy of the transcription of data and the information the researcher receives during the interview hinges on the proper use of audio recordings and interview notations.

All the shared themes were conveyed in the perspectives of all the participants in the study through their own voice. Each participant in the study brings a network of meaningful topics, concepts, perspectives, relationships, and how they make sense of their experiences (Smith et al., 2022). In the analysis of each theme, the researcher had to make sense of the insights that emerged in relation to the meaning as all the participants experienced it. Each of the eleven participants worked in a different industry in a Fortune 500 organization, making the themes revealed in the data a unique lived experience of each participant's industry. Druckman (2005) further suggested that the research participants should be interviewed in their natural element to capture more of the essence of accuracy in the interpretation of the data. In the first step of analysis of this phenomenological study, the researcher established a place, time, and method of transcription of the proposed data. Having the right tools for conducting the interview is paramount to collecting accurate data during the interview process (Druckman, 2005). The researcher should be careful not to choose an uncomfortable setting for the interview process; this ensures the participants are comfortable and ready to divulge significant personal information and experiences.

Coding

Coding is a qualitative inquiry process used by researchers to symbolically give relevance and voice to language-based or visual data (Saldana, 2021). For example, the data could consist of journals, interviews, observations, correspondence, artifacts, or

transcripts (Saldana, 2021). In vivo coding was used in this research study to get the *essence* of the participants' own words. In vivo coding empowers the participants to speak freely and the researcher to avoid making any inferences that would misrepresent the original thoughts of the participants in the study (Saldana, 2021). Themes are developed using several elements of coding to satisfy the analysis of the data. According to the literature, coding reveals "a most often repeated word or phrase that symbolizes or captures language or video data" (Saldana, 2021). Qualitative study researchers incorporate coding in research to give descriptions and to explicate and disseminate data without disrupting the "essential meanings" (Saldana, 2021).

Horizontalization

In the initial steps of the data analysis, the researcher applied the horizontalization process. The process requires analyzing and arranging the verbatim data from the participants' interviews, which use open-ended questions, into a meaningful and cohesive grouping (Moustakas, 1994). According to Moustakas (1994), every word spoken by the participants plays a significant role in the data retrieved by the researcher. According to Moustakas (1994), horizontalization involves paying careful attention to what each participant in the study talks about their lived experiences and grouping comparable items together.

Reduction and Elimination

In the second step of the data analysis, the focus shifts to all the significant statements made by each participant in response to the interview questions that were unique from the rest. According to Moustakas (1994), when horizontal statements are organized, they must meet the following requirements: "a) Does the statement from the

participants contain essential information understanding the experiences? and, b) Can the researcher conceptualize and label latent expressions?" (Moustakas, 1994). Statements that do not meet the requirements are eliminated, leaving relevant criteria (Moustakas, 1994).

Clustering and Thematizing the Invariant Constituents

Moustakas (1994) described the process of clustering and thematizing the quoted words and the researcher's requirement to carefully organize the excerpts and quotes to examine "the latent meanings and groups." (Moustakas, 1994). According to Moustakas (1994), this consists of analyzing and creating a journal of the thematic scheme derived from the participants' lived experiences captured from the participants and described verbatim. The researcher carefully analyzed the themes strictly notating the accurate representation of each participant's story. The transcribed interview responses were put into separate files and documented. An analysis was conducted on the frequency of terms and phrases stated in the interview responses by each participant in the study, and the researcher documented the analysis of the frequency of terms (Moustakas, 1994).

Final Identification and Validation of Invariant Constituents and Themes

During this next step, the researcher's role "involves checking the variant constituents and equivalent themes and patterns against the transcribed narrative of the interview of each participant" (Moustakas, 1994). During the process of comparison of the invariant constituents the themes identified are clearly expressed within the transcripts if identified (Moustakas, 1994). If a theme makes no connection to the participant's experience, the researcher must carefully consider whether to eliminate or delete it (Moustakas, 1994). When conducting an analysis of transcription data imported

it is necessary to perform multiple reevaluations of the expressions from the participants in the study to ensure accuracy (Moustakas, 1994).

Double Coding for Validation

This study used all the verbatim transcripts from the participants to code each experience. The first coding by the researcher was conducted after the last interviews and the second coding was conducted 48 hours after the initial coding. At least two or more attempts to code the data is crucial to ensure that the data is analyzed with the same importance and care (Moustakas, 1994). The researcher conducted three coding analyses of the data to arrive at the sixth theme.

Individual Textual Description

The individual textual description is extracted through the researcher's journal notes and this represents the descriptions of the participants' quotes from the narrative of their experiences (Moustakas, 1994). All the verbatim examples were extracted from the participants' interview transcripts (Moustakas, 1994).

Individual Structural Description

Individual textual descriptions of experiences were developed. "This represents what the researcher has identified regarding how each participant experienced the phenomenon using the participant's verbatim statements" (Moustakas, 1994).

Participants Textual-Structural Description

In this step, everything was combined. The researcher created a description of what got the textual descriptions and what was a structural description by incorporating the invariant constituents and the themes (Moustakas, 1994).

Composite Group Description

According to Moustakas (1994), the last step of the analysis of transcendental phenomenological data is to construct a composite of the descriptions explained from the eleven research participants' words. The final description included the "*essence*" of participants' experiences of the phenomenon. The starting point of the final analysis should be the focus of the proposed research. Staying on the right path is necessary to determine the themes that emerge from the process.

Bracketing Statement

The researcher used the concept of bracketing to conduct the process of setting aside biases and preconceived ideas (Moustakas, 1994). The researcher provided full disclosure of any presuppositions that may be related to the research topic to avoid complete malpractice of the data interpreted during the phenomenological interviews. According to Moustakas (1994), the researcher purposely uses bracketing by inserting a personal statement prior to conducting phenomenological interviews with participants (Pollio et al., 1997). The qualitative research methodology and transcendental phenomenological approach assisted the researcher to develop and identify factors that contribute to the exploration of a new phenomenon stemming from the lived experiences of each participant in the study.

The researcher conducted pre-screening interview meetings to ensure that participants were indeed a good fit for the research sampling and, once determined, a longer interview schedule was set to elucidate the data (Moustakas, 1994). The researcher then constructed the questions to ask the participants while building a rapport between researcher and participant. The interviews were conducted in a semi-structured format to

collect the pertinent data. A sample population of eleven participants was used in the study. A semi-structured interview with open-ended questions is best to collect transcendental phenomenological data and make it easier to manage, collate, and organize the data (Willig, 2001). The researcher carefully initiated dialogue during the interview process with all potential participants. The researcher also documented and journaled notes to collect data from each participant in the study.

Prior to the interview process, the researcher developed open-ended questions that would encourage the participants in the study to explicate all the information possible. The interview questions could be descriptive, narrative, or evaluative. The interview questions were designed at the discretion of the researcher to provide and help generate useful data for the study. A critical part of research questioning is for the researcher to avoid developing closed-ended questions to prevent research bias (Smith et al., 2022). According to Creswell and Creswell (2018), the interview questions initially asked should be in tandem with the questions posed, to ensure they elicit meaningful data.

Researcher Bias

According to the literature, a qualitative study is validated when the researcher recognizes, acknowledges, and tackles any bias issues immediately (Willis, 2007). The researcher's stance, also referred to as the *researcher's position* or *reflexivity*, refers to how qualitative researchers may become sensitive to their biases, preconceived notions, and individual experiences. The researcher should state prior to conducting the study any bias to prevent corruption of the research study (Creswell & Creswell 2018). For example, if the opinion or preferences of the researcher influences the outcome of the data, then researcher's personal assumptions and beliefs cannot become separated from

the research. Honesty and openness in the research are achieved by the researcher acknowledging that "all inquiry is laden with values" (Creswell & Creswell 2018). In qualitative research, *epoche* is the essential process used by the researcher to eliminate all biases and personal assumptions about their own experiences as they relate to the phenomenon in the research and they are expected to remove their own perspective before working with and interviewing research participants, using the bracketing process (Moustakas, 1994). The researcher adhered to the concept of *epoche,* thereby eliminating all personal biases and preconceived ideas during the commission of this study.

Informed Consent

The eleven participants were briefed prior to the interview and informed about the requirements and confidentiality of the data in the study. The researcher clarified any questions or concerns they had as participants in the study and the researcher answered all questions asked by the participants. Each participant verbally agreed and confirmed their understanding of the interview process and was given a copy of the consent agreement to participate in the research. The researcher requested a signed copy of the consent form from each participant in the study.

Confidentiality/ Personal identifiers/ Confidentiality of Study Results

The participant's confidentiality is a critical part of the study, and all the identifiable confidential data must be kept anonymous throughout the entire interview process (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2014). The confidentiality of the participants was safeguarded throughout the entire research study. The participant's legal names were not used throughout the study. All participants were advised and notified that a copy of the published report of the study would be available to them at the conclusion of the study.

Treatment of Data

All participants were aware that transcripts, memos, notes, and all forms of unedited raw data were not available to anyone outside of the research committee. However, all participants were informed that non-identifying data might be used in the study. This disclosure was included in the research protocol and the consent form and explained prior to each participant's acceptance to take part in the study. All personal identifying information for each participant in the study was safeguarded using password protection and was stored on the researcher's internal and external hard drives.

Treatment of Human Participants

All human participants were treated with respect, dignity, and care during and after their participation in the study. No physical interactions took place during or after the interview process between the researcher and the participants. A sample of transcriptions is included in the appendix of this study, which uses a coding matrix scheme. Each transcript contains a summary paragraph of the findings. The data were compiled and analyzed using the data analysis approach for qualitative research described by (Moustakas, 1994). A follow-up phone conversation was scheduled and conducted by the researcher after the recurring themes were identified.

Validation of the Final Report

A study must be viewed as trustworthy to categorize it as being valid and credible. Credibility was established from the strength of the internal validity of the study. None of the participants objected to answering the interview questions. The interview questions were well designed and received by the participants in the study. External validity was strengthened due to the participants' pool being representative of

the population studied. The participants in the study were eleven African American men and women in Fortune 500 organization in the United States. Member checking was conducted to validate the participants' data analysis from the transcripts.

Triangulation

Triangulation is the process that gives validity and credibility to the research conducted (Noble & Heale, 2019). Triangulation identifies the approach to the research and establishes if the concepts are correctly being examined. Validity is important because it ensures the research is being interpreted in the best interest of the stakeholders (Golafshani, 2003). Validity is either internal or external. Internal validity requires that the researcher eliminates any bias that may negatively affect the research results (Onwuegbuzie & Johnson, 2006). Internal validity gives assurance that the research is transparent. The research is not generalizable geographically and demographically to other populations for future study. External validity clarifies the study is representative of the population studied and the findings from the research study are applicable and suitable to the concept studied (Onwuegbuzie & Johnson, 2006).

Triangulation prevents the researcher from submitting research that potentially does not support the methodology soundly. It provides the researcher with a strong synthesis of the methodology offsetting the weakness of one method with the strengths of another (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). There are three advantages of triangulation; it confirms the findings, reduces the deficiencies of a weak method, and triangulation provides strong insight that help the researcher to better explain the phenomenon derived from the study (Bans-Akutey & Tiimub, 2021).

Limitations of the Study

The first limitation is the knowledge of the researcher as a doctoral student and a novice researcher. This moderately limited the researcher in conducting this research due to not having prior experience conducting a study of this magnitude that required an enormous amount of time to complete. The second limitation, Covid-19 pandemic, only increased the stress and trepidation that ensued on the limitations that it posed by not having in-person face-to-face interviews with the participants in the study. The third limitation of this study is the small number of AASE to choose from as participants. The population of males was less than 300 and even fewer for women. There are approximate 300 African Americans senior executives in Fortune 500 organizations, which is approximately seven percent of the total number of senior executive men and women in corporate America who are Black or African American (Wahaba, 2021).

Ethical Considerations

Informed consent is a critical part of collecting data. The participants' names were not identified in the study by the researcher. In addition, the researcher took every precaution to ensure that no human subjects will be harmed when developing, conducting, and administering the questions. Phenomenology is a form of qualitative research built on ethical considerations (Moran, 2000). The research approach seeks to avoid all misconstructions and impositions placed on the experience in advance (Moran, 2000).

First, all participants were briefed on the purpose and the methods of the study before attaining their voluntary involvement in the study. Second, all participants were aware that they have the option to voluntarily withdraw from participation at any time

they choose to do so and that no adverse effects will impact them if they choose to withdraw. Third, all participants were assigned a unique name and number to ensure the confidentiality of the written and digital documentation obtained from their participation in the study. All computer data is protected by password encryption software with only one access, that of the researcher, to ensure privacy. The researcher discussed in depth with each participant in the study, the design and methodology, data collection, and systematic approach to the research interview questions. Chapter 4 explains explicitly the research question, data collection, data analysis, findings, and the discussion used to derive the results, making sure to not disrupt the ethical obligations of the researcher or that of the participants.

Summary

Scholars of phenomenology share a common bond of seeking to investigate the "*pure essence"* of human experience (Denscombe, 2014). Phenomenological research is aligned with the study of human experience whether that is using the transcendental approach of the founding father, Husserl (1927), or the *hermeneutic* phenomenology of Heidegger (1962). They all revolve around the human connection and the mental process that lies within the individual. It helps them make sense of the things they experience and arrive at the *pure essence* of the lived experiences. These lived experiences are the most critical components of the research (Moran, 2000; Smith et al., 2022).

The researcher collected and transcribed the viewpoint of each of the eleven leaders verbatim. During the process of the interview one of the participants in the study made a request not to be visually recorded; the researcher accommodated the participant's request. Communication was lost for 10 minutes with another participant;

however, the interview continued 15 minutes thereafter. The researcher was careful to detail all reactions, as well as the verbal and non-verbal cues made by each participant during the interview process. However, interviewing subjects in the virtual environment proved to be challenging.

The researcher hopes this study contributes to the literature and fills some of the gaps in the that do not exist on African American senior executives in Fortune 500 organizations in the United States. The phenomenological analysis study offered the researcher a valuable amount of dialogue derived verbatim from the experiences of the participants in the study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Chapter 4: Data Analysis and Findings

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological research study was to examine the lived experiences of African American Senior Executives (AASE) in Fortune 500 organizations in the United States. Central to this study is the African American senior executive. The central research question addressed in this study was: *What are the lived experiences of African American senior executives in Fortune 500 Organizations in the United States*? This chapter depicts the research setting, participants' summaries, demographics for each participant in the study, findings of the themes and sub-theme, as well as the results of this study.

Research Setting

The researcher was the data collection instrument in this qualitative research study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The phenomenological methodology was appropriate for the data generation of the information required in this study. All the data were collected using semi-structured interviews with 16 open-ended questions to address the research question. Eleven AASE participants were interviewed, three women and eight men. The participants' interviews were recorded, videotaped, and transcribed verbatim capturing every word that they spoke to produce greater accuracy in the collection of the data. Zoom video meetings and digital tape-recorded conversations were produced with the aid of a computer and iPad in a private meeting room in Richmond, Virginia. The researcher used the private room to ensure that the researcher did not compromise the privacy of the human subjects. The researcher listened carefully to each participant's unique narrative of their lived experiences. The researcher carefully journaled notes and reframed the questions when necessary.

The participants in the study comprised eight men and three women current and former senior executives from eleven different publicly held companies in Fortune 500 organizations. All participants were recruited using one of the following methods: social media site LinkedIn, word of mouth, verbal referrals, active recruitment by the researcher, email recruitment letter, or recruitment flyer. An attempt to recruit ten individuals for this study yielded eleven participants. Eighty-five total individuals were recruited through verbal recruitment, referrals, and social media recruitment posting, and the solicitation of the participant pool ran for forty-four days before the 10th participant agreed; on day forty-five, one additional participant agreed and was interviewed soon thereafter for a total of eleven participants.

Demographics

Eleven African American men and women between the ages of 45-60 years old, three females and eight males were interviewed for this study and asked a total of sixteen questions, which were used as the instrument in the study.

Five demographic questions, and eleven reflective narrative questions were used to guide the researcher. The demographic questions included the locality of the participant as well as the place of birth, the title of each senior executive, and the highest level of education. Eight of the eleven participants attended the Historically Black College and University (HBCU).

To conceal their identity and maintain the privacy of each participant, the researcher assigned each participant with a coded system description to anonymously identify them in this study without giving public acknowledgment of their actual names. The researcher created a coded system beginning with the first interviewed participant, as

Participant Senior Executive 1 or PSE1. PSE1 to PSE11 represent all participants

interviewed in this study.

Table 1

Participant demographic summary

Participant Code	Title	Industry	Age	Born	Live	Education
PSE1	SVP	Global payment	50-55	Northeast	Northeast	Master's degree/HBCU
PSE2	VP	Entertainment	50-55	Midwest	Southeast	Master's degree/HBCU
PSE3	SM.	Marketing	50-55	Northeast	Mid Atlantic	Master's degree/HBCU
PSE4	Director.	Healthcare.	55-60	South	South	Master's degree/HBCU/MIL
PSE5	VP.	Bnk Fincl Ser.	50-55	St KittsW.I.	South	Master's degree
PSE6	VP	Medical Device.	50-55	Midwest	Mid-Atlantic	Master's degree/HBCU
PSE7	SDIR.	Beverage	50-55	South	South	PHD/HBCU
PSE8	SVP.	Financial Serv	50-55	South	South	Master's degree/MIL
PSE9	SVP.	Energy	45-50	South	South	JD
PSE10	SDIR.	Beverage	50-55	South	South	MBA/HBCU/MIL
PSE11	SDIR.	Technology	50-55	Midwest	South	Master's degree

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Executive Background Profiles

The following summaries are a brief introduction to each participant in the study.

Pseudonyms were used to make every effort to conceal the identity of each participant.

Further, at the request of each participant the identifying names and other identifying

confidential information were removed and replaced with a pseudo alternative.

Participant 1: Former Senior Vice President and General Counsel of a major global

payment processing organization, a Fortune 500 company. Served in several capacities

within the organization. Attended a Historically Black University and College (HBCU).

Participant 2: Vice President of risk global entertainment and hospitality organization, a Fortune 500 company. Served over 25 years in the risk management industry.

Participant 3: Attended a Historically Black University and College (HBCU). Former Senior Executive for 12 years with a Fortune 500 global consulting and marketing firm.

Participant 4: Senior Director of a healthcare provider organization. Attended a Historically Black University and College (HBCU) with military service.

Participant 5: Vice President of global banking and financial services Fortune 500 organization with experience in banking and credit cards. Attended a Historically Black University and College (HBCU).

Participant 6: Vice President of Fortune 500 medical device company. Attended a Historically Black University and College (HBCU). Serves as human resources professional.

Participant 7: Senior Director of Fortune 500 company. Attended a Historically Black University and College (HBCU). Several experiences with a beverage company.

Participant 8: Senior Vice President of a Fortune 200 financial services organization. Former military service with 20 years of experience in risk management.

Participant 9: Senior Vice President and General Counsel of Fortune 500 Energy company. Fifteen years of business litigation experience.

Participant 10: Former Senior Director of a Fortune 500 global beverage company. Attended a Historically Black University and College (HBCU) with military service.

Participant 11: Former Senior Executive of Human Resources for Fortune 500 technology organization. Thirty years of service in human resources.

Epoche

Epoche, the first step of the transcendental phenomenology study process requires the researcher to set aside his understandings and judgments, biases, and preconceived ideas to experience a phenomenon in an unfettered state of mind. The challenge for the researcher is remaining transparent allowing a manifestation of consciousness that fosters an unbiased perspective. During the epoche process, the researcher avoids taking a position, allowing the data and observations to possess equal value. Epoche required an intense focus and sustained attention of the researcher (Moustakas, 1994). The researcher is required to enter an intimate place that requires suspension of anything that interferes with the fresh vision. The desired end state of Epoche is an inclination toward a receptiveness that can promote awareness of the personal biases that color thoughts and perceptions while negatively affecting a researcher's ability to actively listen (Moustakas, 1994).

Study Results

The purpose of this study was to address the research question: *What are the lived experiences of African American senior executives in a Fortune 500 organization in the United States*?

The researcher conducted a qualitative transcendental phenomenological study of African American Senior Executives. In this study, the participants' experiences in the workplace as executives in a Fortune 500 organization, revealed that participants made sense of workplace conflicts and challenges by relying on the six emergent themes of mentorships, visibility, diversity, family values, HBCU, and ambition. Phenomenological

methodology was used because it allows the researcher to interview the participants in a natural setting.

The words, extracted verbatim, from the experiences captured from each participant, support and give understanding of the themes and may provide some insight to current and future African American senior executives (Smith et al., 2022). The themes and tables in this study were generated by the researcher and show the frequency where the emergent themes were repeated in the data as transcribed and analyzed by the researcher.

Interview questions, face-to-face Zoom video interviews, digital recordings, and journal note-taking were used to evoke and give meaning to the participants' verbatim answers to the sixteen interview questions in the study. The researcher provides samples of the emotions evoked in response to the interview questions, which uncovered the six shared themes and one sub-theme from the data. All eleven participants work in different industries in corporate America. The six themes and sub-theme have a description, a summary, and samples extracted to support the participants' experiences in their own voices.

Identification of Key Themes

Sixteen interview questions were presented and asked of each participant in the study. Each participant's responses were analyzed, and six themes and one sub-theme emerged. All participants' responses were analyzed to develop a categorized thematic order to examine the shared themes related to the research question *What are the lived experiences of African American senior executives in Fortune 500 companies in the United States?* The examination of video, digital electronic copy, and journal notes of the

interview transcripts resulted in repetitive dialogue and the emergent theme category. All the data were examined and reexamined with the consciousness that something unpredictable or unforeseen could emerge.

The major themes from the analysis of the data represented all eleven participants in the study. Semi-structured interviews were conducted, and full saturation of the data was achieved through the manual data analysis conducted by the researcher, which focused on the lived experiences of African American senior executives in Fortune 500 organizations in the United States. Six (6) major themes and one sub-theme were discovered and presented from the data collected and analyzed for the eleven participants in the study.

Figure 1

Emergent Themes: Mentoring Visibility, Diversity, Family Values, HBCUs, and

Ambition. One Sub-theme: Social Justice
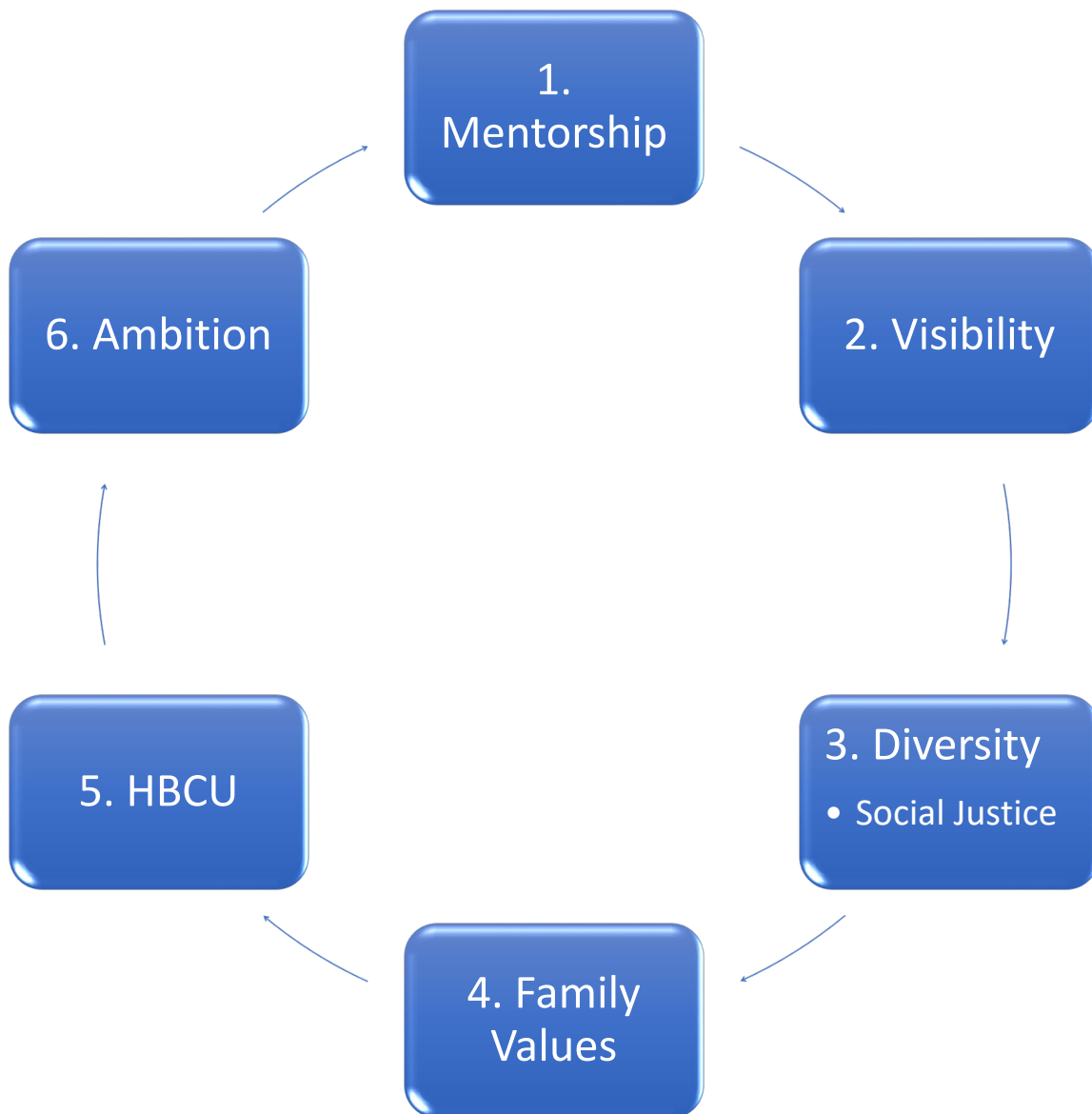
Emergent Theme 1: Mentorship

Table 2

Mentorship mentioned by study participants

Participant	Mentorship Mentioned	
	Yes	No
PSE1	X	
PSE2		X
PSE3		X
PSE4	X	
PSE5		X
PSE6	X	
PSE7	X	
PSE8	X	
PSE9	X	
PSE10	X	
PSE11		X

Note: Total number of times mentorships mentioned by participants in the study = 41

Mentorship. Mentoring programs are an effective way to increase personnel retention and address attrition. Establishing mentoring programs shows accelerated development of new leaders (Dominquez & Hager, 2013). Research shows a strong link between mentoring and positive employee extrinsic value and outcomes, such as increased compensation, promotion eligibility, and overall career mobility (Craig et al., 2012). Rutti et al. (2013) suggested when the two parties in a mentoring relationship seek a positive outcome from the mentoring relationship, they both benefit from the exchange. Dominguez and Hager (2013) suggested mentoring is a way for organizations to reduce the learning curve and cost of training and development. Mentoring has the effect of

reducing employee stress, improving self-esteem, and providing greater awareness and professional skills (Dziczkowski, 2013).

Mentorship was an emphasized emergent theme expressed by the participants in the study. All participants were certain that without the mentorship they received they would not have had the opportunity to advance to become a senior executive. PSE11 stated, "There's nothing better than someone who is looking out for you as a mentor or navigator in the organization to make sure that you are on the right track, someone you can bounce things off. I think that's also particularly important." The participants in this study align with research scholars. Mentoring was highlighted as a theme in the study and the research points to the benefits of mentoring in the workplace. A key opportunity for Fortune 500 organizations to bridge the gap between African Americans underrepresented employees is to make mentorship a part of the core values of the corporate culture.

Participants indicated their desire for mentorship as well as the importance of informal and formal mentorships for the advancement of African Americans and senior level positions in Fortune 500 organizations in the Unites States. They highlighted key situations where they had a mentor and the positive effect that it had on their careers and advancement in Fortune 500 organizations. They also elaborated on the need for more mentorships and made suggestions that seeking partnerships with historically Black universities would increase the presence as well as yield new opportunities for African Americans in the workforce of Fortune 500 organizations. According to the lived experiences of these participants, mentorship is needed both at the senior level as well as

the junior level for African Americans to experience equal opportunities among their white peers in a Fortune 500 organization.

Mentorship is a professional relationship that requires defined roles and tasks between the mentor and the mentee. Everyone, whether the mentor or the mentee, must secure a relationship and commitment to the process which requires being present and performed over time. (Smith, 2021). Mentorship requires the sharing of knowledge, which provides the mentee with an opportunity to gain experience from that person's life experiences whether within or outside of the mentee's workplace (Omadeke, 2021). PSE 1 stated:

> I was able to get some support from some white senior executives that recognized my value and my contribution, and they could vouch for me in those conversations that management had when they were talking about employees.

PSE2 stated:

> Since George Floyd, my company has done more to get African Americans employees' exposure to senior vice presidents ranks, we created an HBCU mentoring program for executives and HBCU students.

PSE3 stated:

> I'm very much helping younger people with their vision; I like to help young people and would love to do a little more and help build them up.

PSE4 stated:

> You're putting your team first so it's not about gaining recognition, you're looking to teach, mentor, and train and coach so you can bring the spotlight on your team.

PSE5 stated:

> I can tell you throughout the years I got to be associated with mentors and based
>
> on my years of service I have had several mentors and they mentored me in the
>
> company and on the corporate team. Without mentors, I don't think I would have
>
> been here today.

PSE6 stated:

> I have had to learn and understand the differences, having a mentor in corporate
>
> America early on in the company for African Americans we need to have
>
> someone who's going to advocate on our behalf.

PSE7 stated:

> I had some good professors and academic advisors. My advisor believed in me. If
>
> it wasn't for her, I would not have completed my PhD and be here today.

PSE8 stated:

> I had a mentor who was a white male. I struggled with why he was so willing to
>
> invest in opening to me. He helped me understand, it's not that I'm just some
>
> benevolent guy but 'you are worth it, you're smart and you deserve it.

PSE9 stated:

> There have been times when I had bosses that were supportive of my
>
> development and my career options and how I navigate that right and having a
>
> good board of directors and peer group you know, was critical to that and then
>
> there's always the issue being heard in the room in the manner that you're not just
>
> the African American who is enthusiastic. And that you are heard across the

business culture and change strategy you don't want people to be one dimensional.

PSE10 stated:

I got to the organization understanding the language understanding the culture and of course, establishing a network of mentors.

PSE11 stated:

There's nothing better than someone who is looking out for you as a mentor or navigator in the organization to make sure that you are on the right track someone you can bounce things off of think that's also very important, so hopefully someone who's kind of been in your shoes if you're trying to get in the executive role, a man executive even outside the organization again just understanding some of the things that they have gone through how they work through those and then again applying that back to you know what you need to continue to grow a network.

Emergent Theme 2: Visibility

Table 3

Visibility mentioned by study participants.

Participant	Visibility Mentioned	
	Yes	No
PSE1	X	
PSE2		X
PSE3		X
PSE4	X	
PSE5		X
PSE6	X	
PSE7	X	
PSE8	X	
PSE9	X	
PSE10	X	
PSE11		X

Total visibility mentions = 22

Visibility. Visibility was the second theme that emerged from the data. Visibility is a way to be always one's authentic self and is important for career success (Barber, 2022). If an AASE does not have a visible presence in their organization, it would be harder to be considered for a promotion, especially if they work for a large organization with thousands of employees. Further, employees must see the value that African American leader brings, and this is diminished if no one knows who they are (Barber, 2022). Visibility gives the executive a shared knowledge and sense of responsibility, authentic and personal commitment, and stakeholders' loyalty.

The participants explained that many times within the span of their career they had encountered African American employees both on the junior level and senior level

who were silent about most things in the organization and did not really express themselves or stand up for themselves. For whatever reason they were described as "missing opportunities because nobody really knew who they were." And they were not really involved and "seemed as if they had no interest in or were perceived as lacking the passion." Further, they highlighted opportunities or situations where being "visible" was essential to them getting the opportunities. Participants in the study discussed how "people should actually be aware of their value and the contributions they had made for the organizations that they work for," and as African American senior executives these contributions yielded positive outcomes for them in their career.

There are numerous benefits to the team and the organization when underrepresented people and other minority leaders are visibly seen by the workforce. For one, their employees are diverse, so having a leader that they can relate to in some way can be effective by a show of pride leading them to aspire to become leaders in the organization. Having a more visible management team may influence the productivity and morale of the organization because employees need to have relationships with the individuals who lead them.

PSE1 stated:

> We need to be less hesitant and start sharing a bit more. We need to get into their spaces, we need to assert ourselves and share and do more and show the passion; we cannot be afraid to show who we are.

PSE4 stated:

> Good leaders look for opportunities to express who they are, and what they can
>
> do. Look for somebody in leadership you can identify with so you can be visible.
>
> […] You must be initiative-taking when promoting yourself as a leader.

PSE6 stated:

> When I was younger in my career, I did not know what to expect or how to
>
> prepare myself. I think growing up in our community you have got to respect
>
> authority do not challenge or push back. So, you know I did not utilize my voice
>
> early in my career which was a bit detrimental, but I had to figure out how to
>
> pivot. That is the one thing I had to learn to use my voice to be visible.

PSE7 stated:

> One thing is, they should figure out a way to sell themselves to the potential
>
> employer."

PSE8 stated:

> I had to be able to make small talk with board members. I am an introvert, but I
>
> had to be more extrovert in my career, which at times was a little uncomfortable,
>
> but I work hard at it.

PSE9 stated:

> Some people work for 8 hours and then they go home, while that's fine but while
>
> you are going home, your colleague is going to the after-hours event, and they are
>
> going to sit down next to me and talk to me or one of the other senior executives
>
> and when they are in a discussion looking for new talent to sponsor, their name
>
> will get mentioned.

PSE10 stated:

> Never allow how much money you make to make you silent. […] It takes courage to speak up. […] Some people stay silent because of their position, title, or how much income they make. […] You must use your voice. […] George Floyd made me realize some of my C-Suite peers, people of color spent so many years being silent, and that event made them start sharing so much.

According to research conducted (Catalyst, 2020; Greene, 2019), minorities and women are underrepresented in executive ranks and in the board rooms. Further, in 2016 fewer than 7.9% of the board seats in African American occupied Fortune 500 organizations (Catalyst, 2020; Greene, 2019). The total number of board appointments that all minorities held was 7.9% of the total number of board positions in 2016; 3.8% were held by African American males, 4% by African American women, and 3.7% were held by other non-African American minorities (Catalyst, 2020; Greene, 2019).

In large organizations, being visible may become a challenge if there are multiple departments and teams. In this type of organizational setting, it would be critically important for leaders to get out in front as leaders. African American senior executives are in the minority leadership in Fortune 500 organizations. Being in the minority requires more of a self-efficacy approach if a minority wishes to be more visible in the organization. The participants in the study were confident that visibility allows others to see the value that one brings to the organization. African American senior executives' perspectives are important to the organization. They bring a new way of looking at critical issues and bring a new set of ideas to the organization as decision-makers and thought leaders.

Emergent Theme 3: Diversity

Table 4

Diversity mentioned by study participants

Participant	Diversity Mentioned	
	Yes	No
PSE1	X	
PSE2	X	
PSE3	X	
PSE4	X	
PSE5	X	
PSE6	X	
PSE7	X	
PSE8	X	
PSE9	X	
PSE10	X	
PSE11	X	

Total number of times diversity mentioned= 36

Diversity. Participants in the study recited situations where diversity initiatives were ineffectively implemented, even when the chief diversity officers of the organizations where African Americans. One of the AASE, participant PSE1, further recommended that "African Americans should not be chief diversity officers; instead, they should be white males with access to the C-Suite level responsibilities and other employees who could facilitate change. Chief diversity officers should be employees who have access to improving revenues for organizations. That way they would have more of an opportunity to bring change through implementation of policies concerning diversity."

Diversity was said to be an issue that was more about "being on paper," as it was not about something substantive. PSE1 refers to this as "not shedding light on the true

issues underlying issues in these organizations that they work for." All the participants in the study spoke about how diversity, equity, and inclusion processes had improved since the police incidents with George Floyd and Brianna Taylor, and how they had been able to have conversations with leaders in their organization. Still, others saw improvements in their organizations on diversity issues spike after the George Floyd and Brianna Taylor tragedies.

Diversity emerged as the third theme from the data. Diversity requires a commitment from the organization's leadership team all the way down to the staff employees. Fortune 500 organizations are successful when they foster employees' differences regardless of race, religion, sex, national origin, or familial status. Making a proclamation for diversity is an effective way for employers to show their support for a more inclusive corporate environment. Fortune 500 organizations could become a more diverse workplace by supporting more inclusivity for all employees within the organization (Sabharwal, 2014). A McKinsey (2018) study identified companies that encouraged an ethnically diverse environment to gain 35% more return on investments. Berk (2017) found workforces that are deliberately or knowingly biased, waste skilled resources and good opportunities to do business.

The theme of diversity was frequently mentioned by the participants in this study as an essential part of their leadership development. AASE's agreed that when diversity is supported and efficiently managed by organizational leaders, employees from all demographic backgrounds feel included, secure, and supported. In a 2016 study, Noland et al. of the Peterson Institute, surveyed over 21,000 individuals in 91 countries; the data suggest that hiring women in executive level positions may improve performance

(Noland et al., 2016). Although diversity has helped to increase the representation of African American men and women in Fortune 500 organizations, more work needs to be done to increase the number of CEOs of Fortune 500 organizations. At the time of this research, only six African Americans, including three women hold CEO positions in Fortune 500 companies and a total of three hundred men and women AASE are leaders in Fortune 500 organizations in the United States (Wahaba, 2021). The numbers for Black executives in corporate America have continued to decline over the past 15 years, most recently Kenneth Frazier CEO of Merck due to retirement.

PSE1 stated:

> We had a chief diversity officer who was Black, and you know that is the trend. But I do not believe it's effective because most chief diversity officers are not responsible for revenues. They are either in HR or another group and not responsible for bringing in sales revenue and profits. Based on my experience with diversity issues, your (chief diversity officer) needs to be a white male, at the C-suite level, and have that responsibility to facilitate change.

PSE2 stated:

> I think it has been good. I have good leaders, the right leaders who understood the need to have diversity within the organization.

PSE 3 stated:

> We must look at people with diverse types of disabilities too. I do think we are trying extremely hard to make sure people are heard and represented by several types of people. I am working on initiatives on diversity and equity. Since

everything happened with George Floyd, you now know everyone talks about

diversity and equity.

PSE4 stated:

Diversity, equity and inclusion play a huge, huge, role. Diversity is an integral

part of who we are, and it is how you look to make sure that voices that are not

usually heard are recognized about the disadvantage.

PSE5 stated:

Diversity is one of our key and core strategies here at the bank and in everything

we do each day. […] The bank has been preaching about diversity since Black

Lives Matter. For me diversity and inclusion mean we must make sure we are a

diverse company. […] must make sure people are equally qualified, not just about

black, or white or grey; hire the best workforce.

PSE6 stated:

Diversity plays a huge role as for quite some time I think what has changed the

last couple of years is just being more intentional about diversity, equity, and

inclusion. Yes, it is more than just representation. It is now part of the company

education and setting a foundation for what we want to see and our beliefs and are

part of our mission, so we have been very diligent in terms of [you know] DEI

training our employees.

PSE7 stated:

I have experienced diversity at work. My organization implements diversity,

equity, and inclusion and it's important. And, how the impacts of diversity equity,

and inclusion matter. When we are interviewing candidates that is one of the

questions we ask. […] *Give us an example about a diverse and inclusive project you have worked on or what is the most inclusive or diverse environment you've worked in?* […] More definitely, I see a diverse team here at my organization, in terms of gender and ethnicity and job rank in my organization. […] Diversity is especially important in my organization.

PSE8 stated:

One thing I have learned with diversity equity and inclusion [is that] people are not comfortable hiring people who do not look like them. Or, with schools that are not like theirs. I have the most diverse team within Finance. I am helping others to diversify their departments. I am a spokesperson for African Americans, women, and veterans.

PSE9 stated:

Diversity you know it is hard you know to be the first anything right, you know. Being the first African American to do something is only cool when they are giving me awards and inviting me back to say something. DEI is integrated into our corporate culture, and we think about DEI before we make final decisions in the company.

PSE10 stated:

I think for a while we allowed organizations to define diversity. To allow it to only be gender platforms, which is especially important but, I may be going off the rails if I say more. I think all these platforms about diversity only mention gender and nothing about people. Diversity existed prior to George Floyd in organizations because they had to have something like that. I do not feel they

gave it the full commitment and the resources, or the attention diversity truly

deserves.

PSE11 stated:

At one of the Fortune 500 companies, I worked for, I saw the first African

American vice president. I was really looking at her to see what kind of force she

would be as a positive role model. When they say you want to see someone that

looks like you, that's true diversity. I talk about my experiences to other African

Americans. When I recruit you do not find a ton of African Americans in

technology it is not a truly diverse field. I see myself as paving the way for other

African Americans. It goes back to talking more about diversity.

Sub-Theme 1: Social Justice

Table 5

Social justice mentioned by study participants.

Participant	Social Justice Mentioned	
	Yes	No
PSE1	X	
PSE2	X	
PSE3	X	
PSE4	X	
PSE5	X	
PSE6	X	
PSE7	X	
PSE8	X	
PSE9	X	
PSE10	X	
PSE11	X	

Total number of times Social Justice mentioned= 25

Sub-Theme Social Justice. During the interview Social Justice emerged as a sub-theme of diversity. All the participants in the study mentioned the significance of implementing better Social Justice policies to improve economics, healthcare, education, employment, and security of all minorities in the United States. Social Justice was viewed by the participants in the study as a catalyst for engagement between communities of color and the policymakers in the United States to bring positive changes to the differences in disputes.

The sub-theme of Social Justice emerged in the data. During the interview questions Social Justice was aligned with the theme of diversity. Social Justice refers to a society where the more fortunate help the less fortunate. In this study the African American senior executives interviewed refer their concern to the importance of helping the underrepresented people in their communities. According to the participants in the study, some of the key features of Social Justice are equal opportunity concerns for human rights, participation, equity, and access.

All the participants' lived experiences were affected by how they perceive the lack of fair and equitable Social Justice in our society. The George Floyd and Brianna Taylor deaths were both noted as issues that have changed the scope of being an African American senior executive in a Fortune 500 organization in the United States. All of the AASE stated that the changes in their organizations include positive initiatives that were implemented after the nationwide outrage that resulted over the tragic deaths of the two African Americans during their interactions with police officers.

> ***PSE1*** My focus is now on social governance; I now help organizations figure out how they engage with employees who did not have the best experiences. […] So,

I help Fortune 500 companies develop strategies with their acute focus on representation of Black and brown people.

PSE2 Before George Floyd and Social Justice issues, we did not have demographics on how many Black executives were in the company. […] We found out the number of Black executives was well below when compared to the general population.

PSE10 Since George Floyd there's a sense of urgency; more resources are now dedicated to integrate organizations conscientiously.

PSE9 After George Floyd some of our leaders were asked how we could demonstrate as a company a commitment to Social Justice, so we developed an agency promise scholarship fund to aid students around the United States.

PSE6 Things have changed significantly since George Floyd and Brianna Taylor. […] We are being more intentional, setting the foundation for how inclusion matters as part of our mission.

PSE 5 The bank supported diversity long before the Black Lives Matter movement.

Emergent Theme 4: Family Values

Table 6

Family values mentioned by study participants

Participant	Family Values Mentioned	
	Yes	No
PSE1		X
PSE2	X	
PSE3	X	
PSE4		X
PSE5		X
PSE6		X
PSE7	X	
PSE8	X	
PSE9	X	
PSE10	X	
PSE11	X	

Total number of family values mentioned= 25

Family Values. Seven of the eleven participants in the study spoke extensively on family and how critical the support of family and friends were to their success. The family helped to keep them motivated and all eight had compelling stories about their family's journey. All the participants discussed a compelling story about their family and the values they learned from family, which has played a key role in the success of each of the participants highlighted in the fourth theme. PSE 9 discussed how his mother taught him not to complain about the times when the electricity in their home was off. PSE 11 discussed the significance of experiencing her mother going to work every day and pursuing advanced degrees with little money or time to sleep or eat while raising three kids as a single parent.

Family values was the fourth theme that emerged from the data. Personal values begin at an early age for most of us. Family values start with the interactions between

family, friends, and our social experiences. Successful leaders take the initiative and show up when it is necessary to collaborate with others and take responsibility for their professional development (Ceja et al., 2010). The values instilled in each of us determine who we will be as leaders (Patel, 2019).

PSE2 stated:

> My parents set an example for me not letting me be a lazy kid. […] My parents were very influential setting standards early in my life. […] The gentleman that I talked about, Bill, who still calls me every day trying to tell me what to do, he was an influential part of my success too. […] And, I have friends who have been supportive and competitive in a manner that is helpful to my success in my career.

PSE3 stated:

> I believe we all learn how to be professional and carry yourself from their parents, it starts early in your life.

PSE7 stated:

> I would say my parents because, it was not a question of do you know where you are going to college it was a question of where you are going to college. My parents have advanced degrees. So, I would say my parents were the most influential to my success as [a] leader. I also had some good academic advisors, but my parents were the most influential factor attributed to my early success.

PSE8 stated:

> I say this because my mom never finished high school, my father was in the military he got his GED, so we talked about major excesses having parents who understood right from wrong. The basic life principles sent me along the way. I

was the youngest of three I had two older brothers one became a CEO. I've been able to put my father in mother's name on things that will last forever. My dad worked every day he never complained, and his vision was I'm going to do everything I can to allow my children to succeed and he never complained even though he had health issues and all those things. My mom my mom never finished high school but if she read so many books let's leave you in different things like that you would think that she was an expert.

PSE9 *stated:*

It's wholistic right. I mean it's coming from a foundation a solid foundation where my family took and taught me notwithstanding their circumstances. You know you're capable of doing anything you don't have any self-doubt - meaning that you know people cannot tell you what you cannot do. The things you cannot do are things you tell yourself. A kid having that kind of family support and self-confidence instilled in me by my mother obviously the rock. But that old community concept of strength was strong and [the] importance [of] self I didn't do. You know based on faith education and in a sense right so wherever I go wrong if I don't belong when I get there. Right, it's I don't ever answer myself with guests. Being a guest in that place because part of the challenge is with growing and influence in the organization. If they always presume that you are a guest, then they don't expect you to participate fully. Just jump in. I think it's having extraordinarily strong resilience. I grew up in a working-class neighborhood with a single mother who knew what it was like to come home and turn on the light switch and not have lights come on. And it's like staying in lunch

line you take lunch because you cannot get a regular lunch card. So, you know we had one car in the family, and you cannot , so there's nobody to run you around to your school or to the Boy Scouts or whatever clubs or whatever you want to do. Everybody knows when the power goes off and everybody knows and talks about it. When you know you did not get a job you were qualified and even overqualified [for] but have somebody say you know you are not overqualified even when it seems like being qualified for that job would have changed your life. So, I'm able to avoid those tactics when somebody says you know you should do this and you don't do that, I'm able to ask, why not?

PSE10 stated:

Second, my mother. My parents divorced when I was young, so I watched my mother work two and three jobs. I watched her sacrifice for me and my brother. I watched her show us what family is all about. The three of us were a tight knit group so I learned early that there is no such thing as quitting. I watched her make decisions for the betterment of the family. There's no such thing as I cannot, right? In fact, for my daughter's graduation, she wore a scroll on the back that said weavers don't quit. That's something that I've always shared with my children. That came from my mom. One thing my mother instilled in us we tried to instill the same thing in our children. I would not have experienced being a pilot but it's truly the best experience of my professional life. No, I talked to my kids about work. I can tell you one person that I think of a lot that I give her all the credit I experience some things in the Army really and I was like, you know, I'm done I'm wanting to get out right. I'm going to get a civilian job but, my wife

asked if I could do anything they'll keep doing and having fun. What would I think you would like to do what can I do to keep having fun she said. Well to fly I said. I would never be able to do that without her, so I gave her a lot of courage to help me to go for it even though the odds were stacked against me significantly. She encouraged me to try, and I went at it at 100%. My mother gave me courage for sure.

PSE11 stated:

I mean I got to say my mom because she was there to push me, she was there you know to support me. Obviously pushing me for not only for my undergrad degree so it's like there were other things to do besides college than to go to college, right? So, and then just looking at her as an example as well or I just remember when I was a little girl, she was going back to school to get her masters so she could you know excel as a teacher, counselor, and administrator. She retired from education. I'm going to say she was certainly a major part.

Family values, according to the participants, are best described as the understanding of what shapes who you are. These values differ from person to person, but one consistent fact is, each African American senior executive's values have had a profound impact on who they are and their success as leaders. The compelling stories of family, adversity, and hope influence the early foundations of each participant and bring a sense of motivation and drive to succeed as AASE leaders in a Fortune 500 organization.

The participants in this study all have a set of unique family values and life experiences idiosyncratic to each of them. These values and experiences profoundly

shaped who they are as leaders in a Fortune 500 organization. The person they have become was instilled and significantly influenced by their family values at an early age. PSE10 gives a clear example of this in his response, […] PSE10, "I learned early that there is no such thing as quitting." […] PSE8 was quoted as having parents who understood right from wrong as basic life principles.

Family values establish an integrity within each participant and shape the way they lead their organizations. Each participant that identifies family values as a theme, harnesses their family values successfully and this allows each of them to be a success in a Fortune 500 organization and this in turn has a positive impact on the people they lead.

Emergent Theme 5: Historically, Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU)

Table 7

HBCU mentioned by study participants.

Participant	HBCU Mentioned	
	Yes	No
PSE1		X
PSE2	X	
PSE3	X	
PSE4	X	
PSE5	X	
PSE6	X	
PSE7		X
PSE8		X
PSE9	X	
PSE10	X	
PSE11	X	

Total number of HBCU mentioned= 15

HBCU . HBCUs was the fifth theme that emerged from the data. In 1890, the United States Government passed the second Morrill Act of 1890. It was a mandate that states offer land grants to institutions serving African Americans. According to a recent poll, African American students benefit from a better support system when attending an HBCU than a traditional white institution of higher learning and experience a rich alumni network as well as greater well-being (Seymour & Ray, 2015). Eight of the eleven participants mentioned the significant need for more African Americans in senior leadership positions with Fortune 500 organizations and each one had the profound belief that HBCU provided a unique opportunity to provide a pipeline of future AASE candidates.

Eight participants emphasized these benefits would bring having greater access to Historically Black Colleges Universities (HBCU) graduates, which could offer a way to improve challenges that come with the recruiting, hiring, retention of African Americans as senior executives in Fortune 500 organizations. Participants pointed out the value and the talent that exists within the HBCU candidates. Participants in the study implied that HBCUs may offer a talent pool and networking opportunities to recruit, hire, retain, and develop a network of future African American senior executives.

Seven of the eleven participants in the study attended HBCUs as indicated by the symbol *HBCU* in the education section of the demographic data for the participants in this study. HBCU students have successfully represented the American way of life in many ways. These institutions of higher learning have produced CEOs of Fortune 500 organizations, men, and women in military service, first responders, teachers, medical doctors, lawyers, and senior executive leaders in all areas of our society.

Eight participants in the study advocated for recruiting, hiring, and mentoring students from HBCUs. All the participant senior executives believed success came as a combination of help from informal mentoring by a few senior executives in the organizations. Participants emphasized the need for those who aspire to move up the ranks of senior executives in their organization to continue to do things that were necessarily not always seen as the easiest thing or to volunteer for assignments that were more complex to make sure that they maintain their positions and are eligible to even be looked at or seen as potential candidates for promotions. Mentoring by far was a necessary beginning for all these senior executives to arrive on a path to greater success in a Fortune 500 organization.

> *PSE2:* We, at …, have created a program with HBCUs and senior executives. […] We have implemented better hiring practices. We recruit and mentor students from HBCUs and Hispanic serving institutions.
>
> *PSE3:* We must open an applicant pool of more students from HBCUs. […] there is a significant amount of benefit to do[ing] this.
>
> *PSE4:* To hire the best workforce, you need to start over again. […] The first thing you should do is go to the Historically Black Colleges and Universities. […] We need to consider candidates from HBCUs too.
>
> *PSE5*: We actively recruit at HBCUs. […] We have improved hiring of minorities tremendously. […] I have worked for my company for 37 years. […] I have seen significant improvement when hiring minorities.

PSE6: I have seen a recent positive trend. As a Fortune 100 organization we can build better relationships with African Americans through HBCUs. […] We are introducing the organization to HBCUs more often.

PSE9: When hiring, we need to suspend our way of thinking based on meritocracy. […] We need to stop using the established system that says, *if you go to certain schools and have certain grades then you are more qualified to do the work.* […] We need to look at HBCUs for people who have different experiences and went to other schools and still made the grades.

PSE9: Most CEOs did not attend Ivy League schools; they did not go to Princeton, and Harvard. […] They did not attend the University of Chicago, etc. […] We need to do a better job of hiring from the nontraditional schools too.

PSE10: When talking about improving diversity, they would say well, we are not getting enough people from the University of Maryland or Missouri, Iowa State. We are struggling to get diverse candidates from these schools etc. it was frustrating at times, but I often had to interject and ask why we did not recruit from HBCUs. Why are we only targeting white institutions? […] I would have to explain repeatedly, HBCUs have a rich talent base.

PSE11: African Americans do not major in accounting as much as non-African American students. I am creating more opportunities for African Americans in accounting. I am working with the National Association of Black Accountants and Black CPAs association to recruit from historically Black schools.

Emergent Theme 6: Ambition

Table 8

Ambition mentioned by study participants

Participant	Ambition Mentioned	
	Yes	No
PSE1	X	
PSE2	X	
PSE3	X	
PSE4	X	
PSE5	X	
PSE6	X	
PSE7	X	
PSE8	X	
PSE9	X	
PSE10	X	
PSE11	X	

Total number of times ambition mentioned=11

  Ambition. Ambition was the sixth theme that emerged from the data. Ambitious leaders are successful because they envision their own success and strive to surpass what is expected of them (Beer et al., 2011). Ambition is a middle-level trait that drives career success through personal achievement, educational attainment, occupational prestige, and income (Judge & Kammeyer-Muller, 2012). Leaders who embrace both vision and mission of the organization show a higher ambition to succeed (Beer et al., 2011). African American senior leaders invest themselves in their organizations no differently from any other group. They value their employees and their responsibilities in the organization as all non-African American leaders do.

  Ambition emerged in the opening statements of each participant's voice.

  The participants confidently expressed how important it was to advocate for themselves as leaders. Being self-advocates and honest about their experiences and

feelings give them the confidence to be successful leaders navigate their way through adversity in the organization. Each one of these senior executives expressed the importance of "ceasing every opportunity", even the ones that were not readily available to some African American's despite being equally qualified for the positions. AASE in the study further revealed they each had shared value of hard work and belief in oneself. They illuminated the satisfaction and happiness from knowing they put the work in to achieve something and going through the process and reaching the goal was second to none.

PSE7 stated; "I have to trust my team, trust is a big part of being a leader, they clearly are doing things that are not my area of expertise." African American senior leaders have shown their willingness to be part of the team and they invest their time and energy to help make their organizations more successful by performing above and beyond the expected task.

PSE10 stated: "Establishing yourself as credible based on results, we get the results, we perform and that gives us a seat at the table." Ambition builds credibility and being credible means, you have visibility as a leader.

PSE1 stated: "I am not saying you need to kick down the door , but you need to go through the door and be part of the conversation." AASE are a group of flexible leaders and resilient people who bring their authentic self to the organization every day. The following are transcripts from the participants in the study.

PSE1: T/C

I was the only senior manager at any level for 15 years at a payment processing company. My experience was fine, but I will say a few things. For one, I don't

wake up in the morning and think that I'm a Black person like most people. I really wake up in the morning and you think about my day and other things like getting ready to go to work or you know the children. Whatever you're thinking about things you need to do, or you want to accomplish and so at that time I will lose sight of [the] fact that I know I was a Black executive. People who are seeing me and experiencing them. When I am experiencing them, I don't think necessarily thinking about them being white, but I have realized that at times everything was about me being Black and I say that because in those moments when it happens and then not necessarily in bad way etc. then you start realizing, you know, you're reminded of the differences.

PSE2: T/C

That is a big question, I think it has been good but that is because I have had good leaders who understood my value, who understood the need to have diversity within their organization. So, I would say the hurdles that other Black executives face, a lot of them were removed from me because once I have been in the organization for so long before I became an executive. [I] have a good record. I have people around the organization who knew me, my work and were willing to sponsor me so I benefited from that for 25 years here. I have been an executive since 2015. And when I think about it a lot of time, most of my time here has not been as an executive, so it is great to be one now.

PSE3: T/C

Well, with my current company it is going well. I am working my way up slowly but surely trying to understand everything. I do not have anything negative to say.

It has been a good start. Prior to this I was a senior manager for 12 years at my

prior company and it started truly well and let us just say I left on my own terms it

is confidential. But things got ugly in the end. However, things were great there

when I started, of course. While there for 12 years, I was able to network my way

up to the top, but I do not like the way it ended.

PSE4: T/C

I would say I have succeeded mostly through word of mouth. Things are now

coming together after all some years now. I am meeting other executives around

the United States people. I am sitting down with top executives in the company.

My biggest challenge was getting used to my position. It was not about working

in corporate America; it is because I spent years in the military as a high-ranking

officer. The organization structure is different here from the military. It was the

transition from the military to the civilian world that was challenging because of

the skill set that was not readily transferable from a corporate standpoint. I had to

constantly make sure that despite that, I would bring excellence to the job.

PSE5: T/C

I started with the bank when I was 18 years old when I was in college. I started as

an associate. Based on the years of service I have had with the bank for 37 years,

I've had several mentors, and I've been mentored, and I've mentored other

colleagues on the corporate team. Having specific mentors is important. I do not

think I would be here if I did not have mentors. Mentorship is extremely

important. I understand the importance of mentoring. A key thing to succeed is,

you must be aggressive enough to move forward, you must have the right

mentality, and you will be making an excellent choice by finding a mentor. I think finding a mentor is a good decision. I have had a mentor and it is excellent.

PSE6: T/C

What I would say about my experiences is early in my career it was a bit challenging working in human resources at an early age. It wasn't easy, not that it should have been. A couple years ago I moved to a larger organization away from tech companies. Those companies that I don't think you need to know. As an African American male while I was there, I had no one to teach me anything or mentor me. For instance, I was the first person in my family to work in corporate America. I come from a line of teachers and social workers. Family that works in the public sector, so I was the first one in corporate America, so I never had the opportunities even with family members or other people who had the experiences working in corporate America. I had built up informal networks at a younger stage in my career. There is a significant advantage and importance of being able to prepare earlier for success. Having someone there to assist you (mentor) helping you to prepare or having access to a mentor is good. It's harder for you when you're trying to compete. When you don't have help. When I was younger in our community, you respect authority, you don't challenge the authority or push back against people in authority. I didn't know how important it was for me to utilize my voice earlier in life. This was a bit of a detriment to me earlier in my early career. I had to learn the hard way to pivot, but now in my field of human resources as a leader in a leadership position you must influence other leaders in your organization. It was harder for me. For example, when someone stereotypes

females or female leaders in the organization, you know it is not because she's a driver, with extraordinarily strong leadership skills. They'll say something like, she's too aggressive, and that's a strong statement. So, women leaders were looked down upon. I also realize that as an African American it is important to have someone who is going to advocate for us on our behalf. I do not think that I really understood the differences early on in my career. As a vice president I now must identifying someone to sponsor me.

PSE7: T/C

I would say that it was by accident that I stumbled into my field. It was through an internship while in college. And I knew that I didn't want to go back home in the summertime, and I knew that to avoid my dad finding me a job I had to get a job. So, I ended up doing an internship with Johnson and Johnson and that's how I ended up hearing about toxicology. While in college I never heard about the field, and so I accepted the internship position with J&J and was happy working in the lab. I was focused on finding drugs to treat arthritis and so when I was working there, I heard about this fear of toxicology. I heard about toxicology, and I said, OK I could make a decent living doing this and next thing I know after the assignment was over, I graduated and then enrolled in graduate school and that is how I started. My career has been excellent. I have had a lengthy career.

PSE8:

How did I get here? I think that's a good question. I had a mentor who was a white male. I struggled to understand with the fact of, why he was so willing to invest in and open his self to me, a Black woman. He made me understand that it was not

he was just this benevolent guy. He made me feel like 'you are worth it,' you're smart, and you deserve my mentoring. When I left the military, I worked extremely hard. Yes, I had a military background. So, I was relentless about my goals. Later, I had an HR business partner who was a white woman and she advocated extensively for me also to get the SVP role I'm in now. I was able to secure a leadership position early in my career, earlier than I would have without their help.

PSE9:

I first joined this company in 2017 after being a professional entrepreneur. I left that business to start my own law firm. I built my own law firm as well as a private equity group prior to working for a large law firm. My long-term goal was to be an executive, but I was running my own company. I needed to do something different, so I looked for an opportunity. I wanted something that would bring me a challenge. It would have been nice to make millions as an entrepreneur, but I wanted something in senior leadership. I established myself proving myself even though I run a business outside and a private equity group, I felt like I was in a position beyond a senior level. My approach was first. It's the turtle who is more consistent and wins at the end. I took the approach of simply let me, give me an opportunity to demonstrate and I will exceed the expectations.

There were some leaders in the company that were uncomfortable with the color my skin, but I wanted to show them that I brought that extra energy to get into the game meaning that there would be projects or assignments that would not necessarily fit my creativity or would take a lot out of the box to get it done. I

think that the fact that I demonstrated the capacity early in my career to take on things that were a bit higher risk and not fear of failing. I was doing some things well and there was an individual moving up and moving out and I was recommended to succeed him. I took a big leap running power companies as a lawyer by training and private equity. Some operations we really didn't have anything in a bag to run a power company.

PSE10: T/C

For me so I decided to make a jump to corporate America from the military. I had made a promise to myself that I would get an advanced degree so when I got there, I decided to learn the language of corporate America. So, I could get a seat at the table I was committed to going back to a top graduate school and even though I was anxious it was a new thing and a new responsibility, and I was seeking a new opportunity. This was an opportunity for me to do that I was hired to do better. In brand marketing, I had increased responsibilities and that propelled me to become a senior director. The most important thing was getting an advanced degree, and then I got a good understanding of the organization the language the culture, establishing networks, and mentors and that's how it started.

PSE11: T/C

I got here first; I think was the dedication to work in human resources. I have ambitious standards so learning about human resources as an undergraduate was necessary to go far in my career. I went to university just to kind of figure out what I wanted to do, then I had a job with Sprint, at the headquarters starting in human resources, and that gave me a foundation understanding of the company. It

was a wonderful place to work, you were able to set your foundation and I moved

up the field in different areas of HR. I developed a good understanding of

employment law and public relations policies and the things that help you in

human resources. That knowledge eventually got me to a senior leadership

position in the organization. Sprint was the first Fortune 100 company that I

worked for, and I was involved with disputes with unions. I was also a senior

leadership with HP for 13 years.

Summary

In chapter 4, the researcher discussed the research setting, demographics,

participants summary, epoche, study results, identification of the themes, and summary.

The sample population included eleven men and women who currently or previously held

senior level leadership positions in a Fortune 500 organization. The chapter included the

presentation of six themes and one sub-theme explicated from the participants own

words, providing a conceptual framework of the lived experiences of these eleven

participants as senior executives in Fortune 500 organizations. The data sources for this

study included open-ended, semi-structured interviews questions; purposeful sampling;

and journaling. The analysis from the data uncovered supported the six themes and one

sub-theme extracted from the interviews on their shared experiences. In addition to the

key findings, the chapter provides interpretation of the findings, the recommendations,

and the conclusion. The researcher gained a better understanding from the perspective of

each participant in the study. This was central to the research question: *What are the lived*

experiences of African American Senior Executives in Fortune 500 organizations in the

United States?

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, Recommendations, and Implications

This qualitative phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of African American senior executives in Fortune 500 organizations in the United States. Prior to conducting this study, limited research existed on the presented participants, African American senior executives in Fortune 500 organizations in the United States. The researcher's goal was to examine and explicate the lived experiences of AASE as they relate to interpersonal conflict, organizational conflict, and leadership theory. The data analysis through this study revealed six major themes experienced by the eleven participants. The six core themes identified from the interview data brought to light collectively, the African American Senior Executives studied:

1. Consider *Mentorship* a critical part of their journey to success.

2. *Visibility* is key component to be valued for their contributions to the organization.

3. Believe *Diversity* is important to thrive in their organizations.

4. Rely on their *Family Values* to see them through the challenges they encounter.

5. *HBCU* play a vital role in recruiting underrepresented minorities to the senior executive position.

6. Above the average *Ambition* is a trait required to rise to the top of their organization.

The sub-theme: *Social Justice* revealed that the participants believe they have a responsibility to speak up for equity in all communities and be a leader for all to follow.

The findings of the study indicate that AASE navigated and excelled in their position as leaders because they navigated through the executive level environment by the developing unique themes revealed in the study. The six themes indicate constructive responses from the eleven African American men and women to the internal and external conflicts they encounter. These unique themes gave insights into some ways that the eleven AASE navigated their way to the top of their profession to become better leaders in their organization.

The African American Senior Executives in this study, have all developed and established a generic conflict resolution system to manage these barriers and conflicts. The in-depth interviews gave meaning to each participant's viewpoint. Future African American senior executive level recruits may find the research valuable as a best practice guide to navigate through the career. In conclusion, this study could serve as a format for Fortune 500 organizational leaders to identify and resolve organizational conflicts, or executive level leaders to manage their interpersonal conflicts, or for current AASE to use as a point of reference as they become more effective and successful leaders in their industry.

Discussion on Research Question

The research question for this study was *What are the lived experiences of African American Senior Executives in Fortune 500 Organizations in the United States?* The answer to this research question proves to be an opportunity for self-reflection of the tenure and accomplishments of each AASE participant in the study. All eleven participants expressed that their experience attributed to the years of service with the organization, the unique path to the executive level, and their accomplishments despite

the obstacles. Being an AASE in Fortune 500 organizations means making sense of several internal and external factors. Overall, there was a sense of pride evoked by all the AASE participants both as trailblazers in the community and African American senior leaders in a Fortune 500 organization.

Connection of Findings to the Theoretical Framework

The lived experiences of each AASE in the study made connections between the emergent themes explicated in the study and the theoretical frameworks of Interpersonal conflict, organizational conflict and leadership. The knowledge gained from the eleven men and women senior executives in the study is an asset to future generations of AASE to follow. Leadership is defined as the ability to empower people to manage and create strategic change as necessary (Hitt et al., 2017). Interpersonal conflict is a dynamic process that occurs between two interdependent parties with perceived differences that inhibit the accomplishment of their goals (Hocker & Wilmot, 2017). Organizational conflict occurs when two or more parties in an organized institution are in dispute and the parties in dispute determined what are the expected outcomes for each party in dispute and which resources in dispute would satisfy their expectations (Rahim, 2011; Bishara & Schipani, 2009).

The AASE in this study expressed the lived experiences of the journey to success in a Fortune 500 organization as a significant accomplishment in their careers as leaders. All the participants demonstrated a confidence and resilience developed during childhood which represents the foundation that was put in place by core values instilled and learned. Early experiences and family values were an integral part of each AASE cultivating a path to become the leader they are today. The thematic connections to the theoretical

framework of the study analyzed by the researcher are illuminated in the following discussion of the findings.

Interpersonal Conflict Theory and Diversity

The study confirmed diversity was a part of daily lives of these AASE. They all had similar shared experiences arriving to their current positions. All the participants in the study were forthright about the responsibility and sacrifices they made to make sure other minorities were afforded the same opportunities in Fortune 500 organizations. Although there are several similarities in the experiences of all eleven AASE in the study, the focus for all these men and women has always been on the end goal. Diversity is part of their push to increase the number of AASE in Fortune 500 organizations. The findings reveal AASE are quintessential professionals who have the trust of their organizations and are laser focused on getting the job successfully done no matter what background or socio-economical path they each took to get there.

AASE were concerned about establishing transparency and open dialogues with employees and seeking opportunities to collaborate with a diverse group of colleagues. The participants elaborated about finding new ways through diversity to improve the existing working relationships between the AASE and all others in the organization. Participants see creating more diversity was another way to build key alliances. Diversity was a major goal for these men and women AASE in the study. Participants were keenly aware that interpersonal relationships in the workplace are inevitable and the chance for interpersonal conflicts to fester within the organizational culture arises with this. The participants believe diversity opens more opportunities for minority employees to become

a success in all organizations. The following transcripts represent some connections to the responses of the participants in the study and interpersonal conflict and diversity.

PSE1 "I never thought about the differences being a Black executive, I would just wake up every day and do the things everyone else does like, think about family, and the things you want to accomplish at work so at times I lost sight of what I was experiencing was different from my white executive colleagues." "I never really thought about them being white but then there are those times when you are reminded about being Black." "I never approached the job in that way, being a Black or white executive. I realized at times I was in an environment where there is only one person that looks like you." I do believe that Black executives are viewed differently in corporate America and by white executives. Black executives are put on a slower track than some of your white executives because of the perception that they are taking a risk with a Black executive if they give you more responsibilities and leadership decisions."

PSE2: Throughout my career I have always tried to interact or establish a rapport with people no matter their socio-economic level. No matter what country they are from, in my career I have interacted with people across the wealth spectrum when it comes to {….}.

PSE3: I believe professionalism is very important for all employees and it starts with how you are reared at home." "I found interacting with some co-workers and their lack of professionalism very challenging at times.

PSE7: It started with graduate school, as the 3rd African American graduate from the program, I had to deal with what I would call today, microaggressions. I have

been fortunate, but I have friends who have really struggled with the work environment, and they feel as if they were forced to lobby for a promotion and they struggle with this.

I work in a {…} Section of my organization, so I work with a team of individuals in a very intense field, you must be disciplined to work with a group and listen, try to be understanding about others needs that are always changing." I have always tried to figure out some creative way to help people achieve what they want... In my role you need to change your mind set about certain things, try to find a solution when you are working with a group of people, understand their needs too."

PSE10: I believe it's always good to establish a culture of open communication, if situations are not addressed, they can become a problem." An open dialogue for conflicts and to speak out about the things that are bothering you, would be good start so everyone can share their thoughts, without being judged, that's a good foundation…I tried to establish a culture of open dialogue so no one would feel judged.

PSE8: I have endured the microaggressions that {…} African Americans experience. I had to learn how to make small talk with board members and other executives , which was hard and uncomfortable for me at first, but I had to work hard to change the conflict with dialogue." 'My team members are encouraged to embrace the uncomfortable feelings, so we can have an open dialogue with the teams and express the issues. I like to deal with the issues directly, bring them out in the open.

PSE11: If employees feel they will be heard, and they can have a conversation with their leader and break down some of the inherent cultural differences this is good.

Interpersonal Conflict Theory and Family Values

The study findings agreed with the participants' viewpoints on family values. The research participants valued their deep family ties. They agreed that a strong family bond stemmed from their early childhood experiences. The participants revealed family values greatly influence who they are as leaders today. Similarly, according to the participants, their family values are deeply rooted in their characters and revealed that organizations benefit from the family values of their leaders too. Participants elaborated on their system of self-discipline that was passed down from their family values. Participants in the study revealed they learn how to listen and find solutions to problems because growing up and experiencing challenges and adversity in their households made them keenly aware of their employees' needs.

Interpersonal conflicts involve two or more individuals or groups and are an inevitable outcome of human interactions (Smith et al., 2022). The following transcripts represent some of the responses that reveal connections between the participants in the study and interpersonal conflict and family values.

PSE2 stated: My parents set an example for me not letting me be a lazy kid. […] My parents were very influential setting standards early in my life. […] The gentleman that I talked about, Bill, who still calls me every day trying to tell me what to do, he was an influential part of my success too. […] And, I have friends

who have been supportive and competitive in a manner that is helpful to my success in my career.

PSE3 stated: I believe we all learn how to be professional and carry yourself from your parents, it starts early in your life.

PSE7 stated: I would say my parents because, it was not a question of do you know where you are going to college; it was a question of where you are going to college. My parents have advanced degrees. So, I would say my parents were the most influential to my success as a leader. I also had some good academic advisors, but my parents were the most influential factor attributed to my early success.

PSE8 stated: I say this because my mom never finished high school; my father, he was in the military. He got his GED so we talked about major excesses and having parents who understood right from wrong. The basic life principles sent me along the way. I was the youngest of three. I had two older brothers; one became a CEO. I've been able to put my father and mother's name on things that will last forever. My dad worked every day; he never complained, and his vision was I'm going to do everything I can to allow my children to succeed. He never complained even though he had health issues and all those things. My mom never finished high school but if she read so many books. Let's lead you in different things, like that you would think that she was an expert.

Organizational Conflict Theory and Diversity

The study revealed the eleven AASE participants considered diversity an asset to their organization. All the participants in the study explained why having greater diversity among the staff and management in a Fortune 500 organization helps to improve future opportunities for all organizations. Fortune 500 organizations have a diverse and large population of employees, which makes conflict inevitable in such a complex environment. One participant elaborated on their board service. "It's very important to have a diverse corporate board." Several participants agreed diversity is both critical and necessary not only to offer new opportunities in a diverse working environment but to create harmony among a diverse workforce. One participant and former military leader expressed his satisfaction with diversity in the military and suggested that a similar system could be created to model the military's promotion and advancement process. Another participant in the study explained DEI as being more intentional not just in representation but in education and in setting a foundation in the organization's culture.

Participants in the study recalled several DEI strategies that were implemented by their organizations; for instance, "asking candidates to elaborate on inclusive projects" they were part of during interviews. Organizational conflict is a process in the workplace that manifests dissatisfaction, disagreement, or unmet expectations between two or more individuals or groups within an organizational exchange (Constantino & Merchant, 1996). Organizational disputes are unresolved conflicts where unwritten rules are perceived as the expected behavior. The following transcripts represent some of the

responses that reveal connections between the participants in the study and organizational

conflict and diversity.

> PSE11: I certainly would not want to be in an organization where I felt I could not
>
> be free to speak be myself, that would be challenging. Some organizations may do
>
> business in countries that have hierarchal structures as part of their culture, and
>
> this would be hard to change as an executive employee.
>
> PSE2 stated: I think it has been good. I have good leaders, the right leaders who
>
> understood the need to have diversity within the organization.
>
> PSE1 stated: "We had a chief diversity officer who was Black, and you know that
>
> is the trend. But I do not believe it's effective because most chief diversity
>
> officers are not responsible for revenues. They are either in HR or another group
>
> and not responsible for bringing in sales revenue and profits. Based on my
>
> experience with diversity issues you (chief diversity officer) need to be a white
>
> male and in the C-suite level and have that responsibility to facilitate change."
>
> PSE 3 stated: We must look at people with diverse types of disabilities too. I do
>
> think we are trying extremely hard to make sure people are heard and represented
>
> by several types of people. I am working on initiatives on diversity and equity.
>
> Since everything happened with George Floyd, you now know they want diversity
>
> and equity.
>
> PSE4 stated: Diversity equity and inclusion play a huge, huge, role. Diversity is
>
> an integral part of who we are, and it is how you look to make sure that voices
>
> that are not usually heard are recognized about the disadvantage.

PSE5 stated: Diversity is one of our key and core strategies here at the bank and everything we do each day. […] The bank has been preaching since Black Lives Matter. For me, diversity and inclusion mean we must make sure we are a diverse company. […] must make sure people are equally qualified, not just about black, or white, or grey. Hire the best workforce.

PSE6 stated: Diversity plays a huge role as for quite some time I think what has changed the last couple of years is just being more intentional about diversity equity and inclusion. Yes, it is more than just representation. It is now part of the company education and setting a foundation for what we want to see and our beliefs and are part of our mission, so we have been very diligent in terms of [you know] DEI training our employees.

PSE7 stated: I have experienced diversity at work. My organization implements diversity, equity, and inclusion and it's important, and how the impacts of diversity equity and inclusion matter. In fact, when we are interviewing candidates that is one of the questions we ask. […] *Give us an example about the most diverse and inclusive project you have worked on or what is the most inclusive or diverse environment you've worked in?* […] More definitely, I see a diverse team here at my organization, in terms of gender and ethnicity and job rank in my organization. […] diversity is especially important in my organization.

Organizational Conflict Theory and Social Justice

The study identified the sub-theme of social justice, which emerged in the data. Social justice refers to a society where the more fortunate help the less fortunate. In this study, the African American senior executives interviewed voiced their concerns about

inequality and were all advocates for equal opportunity for all. The participants

highlighted and discussed some of the initiatives their organizations were implementing

from within the firm. They all emphasized the importance of helping the

underrepresented people in their communities and beyond.

Key features of social justice are equal opportunity concerns for human rights,

participation, equity, and access. All the participants discussed the George Floyd incident

voluntarily. The researcher witnessed the personal toll and listened to the impact that this

tragedy had on the AASE and each organization they represented. AASE did not hesitate

to directly discuss how the unfortunate occurrence during the arrest of George Floyd that

led to national protest throughout the country, had a profound effect not only on their

organizations but also on each participant and their families' lives. After the protest,

some of the participants in the study had a feeling of loss. Some of the participants felt

they were obligated as leaders in Fortune 500 organizations to make a difference in

African Americans' lives. Participants expressed their mixed emotions about having a

renewed spirit to speak up and speak out for social causes as senior executives in Fortune

500 organizations. The following transcripts represent some of the responses of the

participants in the study and the connection to organizational conflict and social justice.

> PSE1: My focus is now on social governance; I now help organizations figure out
> how they engage with employees who did not have the best experiences. […] So,
> I help F500 companies develop strategies with their acute focus on representation
> of Black and brown people.
>
> PSE2: Before George Floyd and Social Justice issues, we did not have
> demographics on how many Black executives were in the company. […] We

found out the number of Black executives was well below when compared to the

general population."

PSE10*:* Since George Floyd there's a sense of urgency; more resources are now

dedicated to integrate organizations conscientiously.

PSE9: After George Floyd some of our leaders were asked how we could

demonstrate as a company a commitment to Social Justice, so we developed an

agency promise scholarship fund to aid students around the United States.

PSE6*:* Things have changed significantly since George Floyd and Brianna Taylor.

[…] We are being more intentional, setting the foundation for how inclusion

matters as part of our mission.

PSE 5: The bank supported diversity long before the Black Lives Matter

movement.

Organizational Conflict Theory and HBCU

The researcher identified strong similarities among eight of the participants in the

study and revealed a connection among them to the theme of Historical Black Colleges

and Universities (HBCU). In responses to the interview question on diversity, equity, and

inclusion (DEI), the theme of HBCU was mentioned fifteen times by eight of the AASE

participants in the study. Participants believed that HBCU could help fill the gap in

recruiting and hiring of AASE in Fortune 500 organizations. They believe the talent pool

for qualified candidates was readily available in HBCUs. Participants stressed the need to

include mentorship of HBCU students. Participants highlighted the stigma that existed in

the perception of talent determined by the university that students decided to attend.

Participants emphasized HBCUs were traditionally isolated from recruiting and hiring

practices compared to predominant white institutions of higher learning. This they

because they did not have the name recognition that symbolizes excellence in education

or the human connections among alumni that traditionally proved to be a strong network

in Fortune 500 organizations. The following transcripts represent some of the responses

of the participants in the study on HBCUs.

> PSE2: We, at …, have created a program with HBCUs and senior executives. […]
>
> We have implemented better hiring practices. We recruit and mentor students
>
> from HBCUs and Hispanic serving institutions.
>
> PSE3: We must open an applicant pool of more students from HBCUs. […] there
>
> is a significant amount of benefit to do[ing] this.
>
> PSE4: To hire the best workforce, you need to start over again. […] The first
>
> thing you should do is go to the Historically Black Colleges and Universities. […]
>
> We need to consider candidates from HBCUs too.
>
> PSE5: We actively recruit at HBCUs. […] We have improved hiring of minorities
>
> tremendously. […] I have worked for my company for 37 years. […] I have seen
>
> significant improvement when hiring minorities.
>
> PSE6: I have seen a recent positive trend. As a Fortune 100 organization we can
>
> build better relationships with African Americans through HBCUs. […] We are
>
> introducing the organization to HBCUs more often.
>
> PSE9: When hiring, we need to suspend our way of thinking based on
>
> meritocracy. […] We need to stop using the established system that says, *if you go*
>
> *to certain schools and have certain grades then you are more qualified to do the*
>
> *work.* […] We need to look at HBCUs for people who have different experiences

and went to other schools and still made the grades…Most CEOs did not attend

Ivy League schools; they did not go to Princeton, and Harvard. […] They did not

attend the University of Chicago, etc. […] We need to do a better job of hiring

from the nontraditional schools too.

PSE10: When talking about improving diversity, they would say well, we are not

getting enough people from the University of Maryland or Missouri, Iowa State.

We are struggling to get diverse candidates from these schools etc. It was

frustrating at times, but I often had to interject and ask why we did not recruit

from HBCUs. Why are we only targeting white institutions? […] I would have to

explain repeatedly, HBCUs have a rich talent base.

PSE11: African Americans do not major in accounting as much as non-African

American students. I am creating more opportunities for African Americans in

accounting. I am working with the National Association of Black Accountants

and Black CPAs association to recruit from historically Black schools.

Leadership Theory and Mentorship

The emergent theme of mentorship was explained by listening carefully to each

participant in the study and allowing each AASE to reflect on the question asked as well

as on their years of service with one or more organizations. The interview question gave

way for the researcher to identify the consistent pattern across the participants'

explanations to the interview questions. The perspective responses of the participants in

the study evolved from personal experiences as leaders and the inherent practices in the

eleven organizations. In their responses they clearly expressed the connections in their

own words. All the AASE expressed how mentorship influenced their motivation,

teamwork, and opportunities as leaders. The following statements give a view into the influence the theme of mentorship played on their ascent to success. Some of the participants in the study explained how informal mentorship and sponsorship help propel them to a higher position in the organization. Overall, all participants in the study agreed that mentorship was the single most effective way to help African Americans excel to the AASE level in a Fortune 500 organization because your mentor guides and supports the mentee through the process. The following transcripts represent some of the responses of the participants in the study on leadership and mentorship.

> PSE 1 stated: I was able to get some support from some white senior executives that recognized my value and my contribution, and they could vouch for me in those conversations that management had when they were talking about employees.

> PSE2 stated: Since George Floyd, my company has done more to get African American employees' exposure to senior vice presidents ranks; we created a HBCU mentoring program for executives and HBCU students.

> PSE3 stated: I'm very much helping younger people with their vision; I like to help young people and would love to do a little more and help build them up.

> PSE4 stated: You're putting your team first so it's not about gaining recognition; you're looking to teach, mentor, and train and coach so you can bring the spotlight on your team.

> PSE5 stated: I can tell you throughout the years I got to be associated with mentors and based on my years of service I have had several mentors and they

mentored me in the company and on the corporate team. Without mentors I don't think I would have been here today.

PSE6 stated: I have had to learn and understand the differences by having a mentor in corporate America early in the company. For African Americans we need to have someone who's going to advocate on our behalf.

PSE7 stated: I had some good professors and academic advisors. My advisor really believed in me. If it wasn't for her, I would not have completed my PhD program and be here today.

PSE8 stated: I had a mentor who was a white male. I struggled with why he was so willing to invest in opening to me. He helped me understand, it's not that I'm just some benevolent guy but you are worth it, you're smart and you deserve it.

PSE9 stated: There have been times when I had bosses that were supportive of my development and my career options and how I navigate that right and having a good board of directors and peer group. [you know] This was critical to that and then there's always the issue being heard in the room in the manner that you're not just the African American who is enthusiastic. And that you are heard across the business culture and change strategy you don't want people to be one dimensional.

PSE11: Having a leaders or mentor that you can {…} is very important. If you aspire to a leadership role someone that understands what you are emotionally experiencing is good.

Leadership Theory and Visibility

According to the participants in the study, a direct correlation emerged between leaders and visibility and hinges on the importance of being validated by others as a leader in the organization. In Fortune 500 organizations, the central goal is to develop a successful business strategy that harnesses the ability to build positive relationships with all the stakeholders in the organization, especially their employees. Interpersonal relationships are part of an inevitable interaction between leadership and staff employees.

Participants in this study believe successful leaders in the organization are visible to the people they manage. They cited positive meetings with leadership that influenced them and provided moral support for mentorship. In the case of each AASE in this study, visibility is not only a key to personal success as leaders but also necessary to give opportunities to other minorities in the organization who need to see other successful minorities that have a similar shared cultural experience. The participants further shared their view of leadership and visibility in organizations, when they reflected upon the type of leadership that was representative of the diverse groups of employees in the organization and the minority leaders that were visible as strategic partners in the industry.

The participants in the study detailed occurrences of both employees and colleagues. Participants highlighted the importance of selling yourself and being your authentic self, when referring to becoming a more visible leader in the workplace. According to a participant in the study, self-efficacy or taking risks to be more visible is an important attribute to becoming a successful leader. Participants revealed positive use of one's voice to speak up and engage with less experienced staff members; this gave

visibility to leadership. Overall, participants believe visibility and leadership are intermingled in the organization's success. The following transcripts represent some of the responses of the participants in the study on visibility and leadership.

PSE10: I would recommend speaking up and staying grounded. Never allow your title, our position, or your income to silence you. Speak up even when speaking up is unpopular. During the George Floyd incident many of our senior executives were quiet.

PSE8: Be more extroverted. Be willing to try something new. Taking risk is important.

PSE 9: As a child I grew up listening to elders telling stories of not having a voice, they had no way to defend themselves, so it's important to speak up for yourself. I wanted to be in power to help change the dynamic'. I wanted to help those that are helpless, and voiceless. This is the fire that has driven me throughout my career.

PSE6: I utilized my voice early in my career, which may have been detrimental initially because people were not comfortable with me giving my opinion." I had to learn how to pivot and sell voice another way.

PSE1: One of the major challenges is being seen as an executive who can make a difference. I wasn't always as vocal as I needed to be. When I spoke, they realized I had a lot of meaningful things to say. You cannot grow as a leader being silent."

PSE3: "You have to hit the ground running as much as possible. You have to get involved in other efforts meet different people in the company or else you will be

stuck. You have to be willing to stretch yourself a little, not just 9-5, but maybe 8-6.

PSE4 You are how you look, make sure your voice is heard not only in the organization but in the community too. We need to have a place at the table. Look for opportunities to express yourself. Try to identify with someone who is making a difference.

PSE7 I think they should figure out how to sell themselves, let them know why you deserve the position. Always show up being your best. Be your true authentic self, don't be afraid to express this. "Show up for all meetings if you want to be taken seriously, communicate this to everyone.

Leadership Theory and Ambition

The study revealed leadership development and opportunity for advancement is a critical part of reaching and exceeding the personal and professional goals of each AASE participant in the study. The eleven AASE are focused and goal-oriented individuals eager to climb up the ladder in each of their perspective organizations. All eleven AASE are goal oriented, and task focused leaders. During the transcription of the interview data, it was clear that each one of the AASE participants in the study is a highly motivated leader. The participants exude an ambition that made sense of the findings. All the AASE in this study were self-driven about their success and showed general notions to reject failure. AASE in the study adversity as an opportunity to meet and exceed the challenges they encounter every day. The AASE participants in this study were compelled to be great leaders by a combination of their life experiences, education, and the skills and training developed on the job.

One senior executive expressed how lonely it felt being the only African American in meetings and in the board room at times and the emotional rollercoaster he experienced as a leader to be validated by his peers. Another participant in the study used a metaphor "jumping over hurdles" to describe the higher expectations to succeed for AASE in a Fortune 500 organization. One AASE participant in the study with a military background did not feel he had a connection with his corporate peers at the beginning of his career because in the military leadership structure, "we had to work together for one goal." That was of the differences between the leadership structure in corporate America compared to the military hierarchal structure. One of the of the participants identified as the only AASE in the leadership level of his organization opined, "I felt the need to be everywhere all at once" to be a success in a Fortune 500 organization.

In conclusion, the participants' attribute that contributes to their leadership skills, manifests from their ambitious drive. The following transcripts represent some of the responses of the participants in the study on leadership and ambition.

PSE1: T/C

> I was the only senior manager at any level for 15 years at a payment processing company. My experience was fine, but I will say a few things. For one, I don't wake up in the morning and think that I'm a Black person like most people. I really wake up in the morning and you think about my day and other things like getting ready to go to work or you know the children. Whatever you're thinking about things you need to do, or you want to accomplish and so at that time I will lose sight of [the] fact that I know I was a Black executive. People who are seeing me and experiencing them. When I am experiencing them, I don't think

necessarily thinking about them being white, but I have realized that at times everything was about me being Black and I say that because in those moments when it happens and then not necessarily in bad way etc. then you start realizing, you know, you're reminded of the differences.

PSE2: T/C

That is a big question, I think it has been good but that is because I have had good leaders who understood my value, who understood the need to have diversity within their organization. So, I would say the hurdles that other Black executives face, a lot of them were removed from me because once I have been in the organization for so long before I became an executive. [I] have a good record. I have people around the organization who knew me, my work and were willing to sponsor me so I benefited from that for 25 years here. I have been an executive since 2015. And when I think about it a lot of time, most of my time here has not been as an executive, so it is great to be one now.

PSE4: T/C

I would say I have succeeded mostly through word of mouth. Things are now coming together after all some years now. I am meeting other executives around the United States people. I am sitting down with top executives in the company. My biggest challenge was getting used to my position. It was not about working in corporate America; it is because I spent years in the military as a high-ranking officer. The organization structure is different here from the military. It was the transition from the military to the civilian world that was challenging because of

the skill set that was not readily transferable from a corporate standpoint. I had to constantly make sure that despite that, I would bring excellence to the job.

PSE5: T/C

I started with the bank when I was 18 years old when I was in college. I started as an associate. Based on the years of service I have had with the bank for 37 years, I've had several mentors, and I've been mentored, and I've mentored other colleagues on the corporate team. Having specific mentors is important. I do not think I would be here if I did not have mentors. Mentorship is extremely important. I understand the importance of mentoring. A key thing to succeed is, you must be aggressive enough to move forward, you must have the right mentality, and you will be making an excellent choice by finding a mentor. I think finding a mentor is a good decision. I have had a mentor and it is excellent.

PSE6: T/C

What I would say about my experiences is early in my career it was a bit challenging working in human resources at an early age. It wasn't easy, not that it should have been. A couple years ago I moved to a larger organization away from tech companies. Those companies that I don't think you need to know. As an African American male while I was there, I had no one to teach me anything or mentor me. For instance, I was the first person in my family to work in corporate America. I come from a line of teachers and social workers. Family that works in the public sector, so I was the first one in corporate America, so I never had the opportunities even with family members or other people who had the experiences working in corporate America. I had built up informal networks at a younger

stage in my career. There is a significant advantage and importance of being able to prepare earlier for success. Having someone there to assist you (mentor) helping you to prepare or having access to a mentor is good. It's harder for you when you're trying to compete. When you don't have help. When I was younger in our community, you respect authority, you don't challenge the authority or push back against people in authority. I didn't know how important it was for me to utilize my voice earlier in life. This was a bit of a detriment to me earlier in my early career. I had to learn the hard way to pivot, but now in my field of human resources as a leader in a leadership position you must influence other leaders in your organization. It was harder for me. For example, when someone stereotypes females or female leaders in the organization, you know it is not because she's a driver, with extraordinarily strong leadership skills. They'll say something like, she's too aggressive, and that's a strong statement. So, women leaders were looked down upon. I also realize that as an African American it is important to have someone who is going to advocate for us on our behalf. I do not think that I really understood the differences early on in my career. As a vice president I now must identifying someone to sponsor me.

PSE7: T/C

I would say that it was by accident that I stumbled into my field. It was through an internship while in college. And I knew that I didn't want to go back home in the summertime, and I knew that to avoid my dad finding me a job I had to get a job. So, I ended up doing an internship with Johnson and Johnson and that's how I ended up hearing about toxicology. While in college I never heard about the field,

and so I accepted the internship position with J&J and was happy working in the lab. I was focused on finding drugs to treat arthritis and so when I was working there, I heard about this fear of toxicology. I heard about toxicology, and I said, OK I could make a decent living doing this and next thing I know after the assignment was over, I graduated and then enrolled in graduate school and that is how I started. My career has been excellent. I have had a lengthy career.

PSE8:

How did I get here? I think that's a good question. I had a mentor who was a white male. I struggled to understand with the fact of, why he was so willing to invest in and open his self to me, a Black woman. He made me understand that it was not he was just this benevolent guy. He made me feel like 'you are worth it,' you're smart, and you deserve my mentoring. When I left the military, I worked extremely hard. Yes, I had a military background. So, I was relentless about my goals. Later, I had an HR business partner who was a white woman and she advocated extensively for me also to get the SVP role I'm in now. I was able to secure a leadership position early in my career, earlier than I would have without their help.

PSE9:

I first joined this company in 2017 after being a professional entrepreneur. I left that business to start my own law firm. I built my own law firm as well as a private equity group prior to working for a large law firm. My long-term goal was to be an executive, but I was running my own company. I needed to do something different, so I looked for an opportunity. I wanted something that would bring me

a challenge. It would have been nice to make millions as an entrepreneur, but I wanted something in senior leadership. I established myself proving myself even though I run a business outside and a private equity group. My approach was first. It's the turtle who is more consistent and wins at the end. I took the approach of simply let me, give me an opportunity to demonstrate and I will exceed the expectations.

There were some leaders in the company that were uncomfortable with the color my skin, but I wanted to show them that I brought that extra energy to get into the game meaning that there would be projects or assignments that would not necessarily fit my creativity or would take a lot out of the box to get it done. I think that the fact that I demonstrated the capacity early in my career to take on things that were a bit higher risk and not fear of failing. I was doing some things well and there was an individual moving up and moving out and I was recommended to succeed him. I took a big leap running power companies as a lawyer by training and private equity. Some operations we really didn't have anything in a bag to run a power company.

PSE10: T/C

For me so I decided to make a jump to corporate America from the military. I had made a promise to myself that I would get an advanced degree so when I got there, I decided to learn the language of corporate America. So, I could get a seat at the table I was committed to going back to a top graduate school and even though I was anxious it was a new thing and a new responsibility, and I was seeking a new opportunity. This was an opportunity for me to do that I was hired

to do better. In brand marketing, I had increased responsibilities and that propelled me to become a senior director. The most important thing was getting an advanced degree, and then I got a good understanding of the organization the language the culture, establishing networks, and mentors and that's how it started.

Contributions to Conflict Analysis and Resolution Field

The emergent themes in this study contribute to the existing literature in conflict analysis and resolution as they relate to the lived experiences of African American senior executives in Fortune 500 organizations. The six themes and one sub-theme examined in the study provide a unique view of all eleven participants in the study and identified how these lived experiences help them to navigate through conflicts and play a key role in their success as leaders in their organizations. The insights gained from each participant's firsthand account of their lived experiences as senior executives in Fortune 500 organizations may provide value to future researchers in the conflict analysis field.

The six emergent themes in the study indicate that what takes place in the lives of these eleven senior leaders are interpersonal conflicts and organizational conflicts. An example of these conflicts is referenced in PSE1's, verbatim statements, "I believe Black folks in corporate America, both men and women start to face that glass ceiling much earlier in their career because we (African Americans) tend to be put on a slower track for growth and development." PSE 10 states, "Sometimes there are hurdles to overcome as an African American senior level person. Sometimes when I was being left out of the conversation for important decisions, I had to interrupt and say, I have 20 years of experience, so let me back in."

This research gives valuable insights into the professional lives of senior executives and how they perceive themselves to be part of the organization. The findings from the study are idiosyncratic to these eleven participants in the study. Developing a greater awareness of what these leaders experience is important and may help inform Fortune 500 organizations and provide human resource professionals how they can support African American senior leaders at being successful in resolving their interpersonal and organizational conflicts.

Conflict resolution is a multidisciplinary field focused on the way individuals interact and function in various systems and contexts. This study focused on the eleven participants lived experiences in a diverse number of Fortune 500 industries to aid in effective ways to resolve the interpersonal conflicts of African American senior executives. Examining the lived experiences of these eleven senior executives through their voice, may bring a new awareness and give a deeper understanding of how these experiences shaped the successes of each leader and share this with future aspiring African American mentees. The study could also provide conflict resolution professionals with new insights and perspectives for resolving dispute and conflict cases.

Recommendations

The researcher's first recommendation is to expand the research to include the use of multiple perspectives to explore the same phenomenon. For example, examining the lived experiences of non-African American senior executives in Fortune 500 organizations in the United States may provide a perspective that creates a dialogue for conflict resolution. The impact of the participants' conflicts on other people is unknown because it did not fall within the scope of the study. The researcher hopes that one day

more research will further the scope of impact that leads to greater diversity in Fortune 500 organizations in the United States.

The next recommendation reflects the possibility of how the larger field of organizational conflict studies can benefit from this study. Publicly and privately held entities can use the themes in this study to develop better recruiting, hiring, and retention practices. The third recommendation is to conduct a mixed methodology study. The approach to conducting this study used qualitative transcendental phenomenology analysis. The researcher was submerged in the process of the interviews and through the process of Zoom video link and carefully observed all the participants. They appeared enthusiastically involved with the process of the interview exhibiting no discomfort in the format of the interviews. All the participants were extremely cooperative and were enthusiastic and willing to share their experiences with the researcher in a candid and holistic way. The researcher would like to recommend thoughtful consideration be given by other researchers when conducting their research studies using the Zoom linked format to interview participants in future studies. The Zoom interview format may provide researchers and interviewees with a safe and open forum to conduct confidential and private research interviews, allowing the participants in a research study to feel a sense of comfort and be more willing to be candid.

Conclusion

This study will fill some of the gaps in the research on the lived experiences of African Americans in Fortune 500 organizations in the United States and its application to conflict resolution. However further research is needed. This study was conducted with the phenomenological approach to obtain the rich depth of each participant's uniquely

lived experiences. Eight of the eleven participants attended historically Black colleges and universities and three participants in the study had over ten years of military service. However, these were coincidences and not a prerequisite for participants in this study. All participants were asked to be transparent when answering each of the interview questions and reminded to express their feelings through their own words. The researcher hopes that each participant in the study can gain a sense of high achievement from personal involvement in the study and develop a system that allows them to break away from potential negative effects that result from their firsthand adverse experiences at work as senior executives. One of the researcher's intents of this study was to establish a foundation for future studies on the lived experiences of African Americans in Fortune 500 organizations. Future research can use a quantitative approach to the study or a mixed-use study to grasp a larger scale of themes and to see if in fact those themes would correlate with one of the themes from this study.

According to Webster's Dictionary (2022), risk takers have good temperaments, and are deliberate, well prepared, and self-assured. They have a balanced approach to risk as a management task and are very systematic. Risk takers are people with a balance in their approach to a problem and they are not un-nerved easily. They are also positive, resilient, and task oriented. One common characteristic observed by the researcher that remained consistent with all the participants throughout the entire study was the prevalence of risk taking in the leadership of these eleven highly skilled African American senior executives in Fortune 500 organizations. African American senior executives must take a leap of faith and request to be on the frontline with more responsibilities and more complex assignments even when not asked to do so. African

American senior executives must prove daily that they can succeed at the senior level or higher and this requires significant risk taking by all these leaders.

African American senior executives would benefit from sponsorships and more direct engagement between employee and potential suitors. However, sponsorship is codependent on mentorship and the same group of individuals in dominant leadership positions throughout Fortune 500 organizations are the gatekeepers to sponsorship opportunities for African American senior executives (Spriggs et al., 2020). The Fortune 500 organizations that have a mentor to sponsorship program in place to foster leaders from within the organizations are not widely known. One of these organizations is Bank of America. Bank of America developed an ambassador executive training program to groom future enterprise leaders for promotion. Still, other Fortune 500 organizations have promised to do more to engage with minority employees since the George Floyd incident (Edgecliffe-Johnson & Rogers, 2021).

The manuscript explored the interpersonal conflict, organizational conflict, and the leadership of the African American senior executives in Fortune 500 organizations. The researcher's lens identified important issues to understand and if these things are present in all Fortune 500 organizations, then more research is needed. African Americans who work for Fortune 500 organizations with a defined mentorship program in the workplace or formal sponsorship programs will be better equipped to take leadership positions in these organizations. With the proper training and development and equal participation in leadership programs all employees can have a fair opportunity to rise in a Fortune 500 organization.

      The theories give meaning to the conflicts and identify the type of leadership skills each participant developed in a complex and conflict rich workplace known as a Fortune 500 organization. The purpose of the study was to examine the lived experiences of eleven AASE in a Fortune 500 organization in the United States.

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Appendix A

Research Consent Form

General Informed Consent Form
NSU Consent to be in a Research Study Entitled

What are the Lived Experiences of African American Senior Executives in Fortune 500 Organizations in the USA: A interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of Black Corporate Leaders.

Who is doing this research study?

College: Halmos College of Arts and Sciences: Department of Conflict Analysis and Resolution Studies

Principal Investigator: Otis G. Jarvis, MBA.

Faculty Advisor/Dissertation Chair: Urzula Strawinska-Zanko, Ph.D.

Co-Investigator(s): n/a

Site Information: n/a

Funding: Unfunded

What is this study about?

This is a research study, designed to test and create new ideas that other people can use. The purpose of this research study is to examine what are the lived experiences of African American Senior Executives in Fortune 500 organizations. Understanding these experiences are important to developing programs to assist African American employees of Fortune 500 organizations to attain executive level or greater corporate job opportunities, improve the hiring practices of African Americans in Fortune 500 organizations, and promote qualified AASE as appointees to executive boardrooms and the C-Suite.

Why are you asking me to be in this research study?

You are being asked to be in this research study because of your experience working in a Fortune 500 organization. The study will include about 10 people.

What will I be doing if I agree to be in this research study?

While you are taking part in this research study, because of your direct experiences as an African American Executive in Fortune 500 organization. You will be asked to participate in one 45–60-minute interview in-person, on the phone, Skype, Zoom, or at a location convenient to you.

You may have a follow up clarification interview for approximately 30 minutes at a convenient date and time two or three weeks after your first interview.

Research Study Procedures - as a participant, this is what you will be doing:

You will be asked to participate in one 45–60-minute individual interview. This interview will include questions focusing on your experience as an African American Senior Executive in Fortune 500 organization. The interview can be done via phone, Zoom, Skype, or any other meeting forum available to you, or face-to-face at a location convenient to you.

Are there possible risks and discomforts to me?

This research study involves minimal risk to you. To the best of our knowledge, the things you will be doing have no more risk of harm than you would have in everyday life.

During the interview process questions may be asked that may become potentially challenging or reveal some aspect of your experiences as an AASE unrealized before to you. The sensitive and personal nature of the questions asked may potentially cause some psychological discomfort. You may find some questions asked to be stressful or upsetting. If this happens, we can provide some helpful resources to address the discomfort.

What happens if I do not want to be in this research study?

You have the right to leave this research study at any time, or not be in it. If you do decide to leave or decide not to be in the study anymore, you will not get any penalty or lose any services you have a right to get. If you choose to stop being in the study, any information collected about you **before** the date you leave the study will be kept in the research records for 36 months from the end of the study, but you may request that it not be used.

What if there is new information learned during the study that may affect my decision to remain in the study?

If significant new information relating to the study becomes available, which may relate to whether you want to remain in this study, this information will be given to you by the investigators. You may be asked to sign a new Informed Consent Form, if the information is given to you after you have joined the study.

Are there any benefits for taking part in this research study?

There are no direct benefits from being in this research study. We hope the information learned from this study will help us better understand your experiences and others with similar experiences. You will be provided a copy of the research results. Understanding your experiences as an African American Senior Executive in a Fortune 500 organization will help to improve opportunities for other African Americans, who aspire to become leaders in Fortune 500 organizations.

Will I be paid or be given compensation for being in the study?

You will not be given any payments or receive any compensation for being in this research study.

Will it cost me anything?

There are no costs to you for being in this research study. Ask the researchers if you have any questions about what it will cost you to take part in this research study (for example bills, fees, or other costs related to the research).

How will you keep my information private?

Information we learn about you in this research study will be handled in a confidential manner, within the limits of the law and will be limited to people who have a need to review this information. However, the researcher is obligated to report if the participants reveal information that necessitates mandatory reporting (e.g., child abuse) to the appropriate authorities. This data will be available to the researcher, the Institutional Review Board and other representatives of this institution, and any regulatory and granting agencies (if applicable). If we publish the results of the study in a scientific journal or book, we will not identify you. All confidential data will be kept stored on a secure server and can be accessed by only authorized Nova Southeastern University researchers for 3 years. Any paper notes or consent forms will be stored in a locked fireproof filing cabinet in the researcher's private home without any identifying information. All data will be kept for 36 months from the end of the study and destroyed after that time by removing and deleting it from the server and all paper documents will be shredded. A pair of Noise cancelling Headphones will be worn while transcribing the interviews to ensure other people will not be connected to the participant's names.

Will there be any Audio or Video Recording?

This research study involves audio and/or video recording. This recording will be available to the researcher, the Institutional Review Board and other representatives of this institution. The recording will be kept, stored, and destroyed as stated in the section above. Because what is in the recording could be used to find out that it is you, it is not possible to be sure that the recording will always be kept confidential. The researcher will try to keep anyone not working on the research from listening to or viewing the recording by the reviewing the research only when the researcher is alone and with the aid of noise cancelling headphones.

Whom can I contact if I have questions, concerns, comments, or complaints?

If you have questions now, feel free to ask us. If you have more questions about the research, your research rights, or have a research-related injury, please contact:

Primary contact: Otis G. Jarvis can be reached at (804) 502-7032, email: ojarvis@mynsu.nova.edu

If primary is not available, contact: Urzula-Strawinska-Zanko, Ph.D. can be reached at (954) 262-3041

NSU IRB APPROVED:
Approved: April 14, 2022
Expired: Exempt
IRB#: 2022-189

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD
3301 College Avenue
Fort Lauderdale, Florida 33314-7796
PHONE: (954) 262-5369

Research Participants Rights
For questions/concerns regarding your research rights, please contact:

Institutional Review Board
Nova Southeastern University
(954) 262-5369 / Toll Free: 1-866-499-0790
IRB@nova.edu

You may also visit the NSU IRB website at www.nova.edu/irb/information-for-research-participants for further information regarding your rights as a research participant.

NSU IRB APPROVED:
Approved: April 14, 2022
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INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD
3301 College Avenue
Fort Lauderdale, Florida 33314-7796
PHONE: (954) 262-5369

Research Consent & Authorization Signature Section

<u>Voluntary Participation</u> – You are not required to participate in this study. In the event you do participate, you may leave this research study at any time. If you leave this research study before it is completed, there will be no penalty to you, and you will not lose any benefits to which you are entitled.

If you agree to participate in this research study, sign this section. You will be given a signed copy of this form to keep. You do not waive any of your legal rights by signing this form.

SIGN THIS FORM ONLY IF THE STATEMENTS LISTED BELOW ARE TRUE:
☐   You have read the above information.
☐   Your questions have been answered to your satisfaction about the research

---

Adult Signature Section

I have voluntarily decided to take part in this research study.

_____   _____   _____
Printed Name of Participant   Signature of Participant   Date

_____   _____   _____
Printed Name of Person Obtaining   Signature of Person Obtaining Consent &   Date
Consent and Authorization   Authorization

Appendix B

- Recruitment Flyer

Otis G. Jarvis

AN OPPORTUNITY TO SHARE YOUR STORY

To participate in the study, we need:

01 People who are former or current African American Senior Executives in Fortune 500 Organizations.

02 People who are willing to volunteer without compensation.

03 People who are willing to volunteer 45-60 minutes of their time for an interview.

04 People who are willing to share their lived experiences working in a Fortune 500 organization.

Halmos College of Arts and Sciences
NOVA SOUTHEASTERN UNIVERSITY

NSU Florida

ABOUT

This study is being carried out as part of my research study at Nova Southeastern University for completion of my Doctoral Degree in Conflict Studies.

The journey to attain a senior executive leadership position in Fortune 500 organizations intersects with conflicts and structural barriers, and still remain a dream deferred for many African Americans seeking senior leadership roles. This study is design to examine the lived experiences of African American Senior Executives in Fortune 500 organizations.

More Information:
(804) 502-7032
OJARVIS@MYNSU.NOVA.EDU

Appendix C

Recruitment Letter

NSU
Florida

Halmos College
of Arts and Sciences
**NOVA SOUTHEASTERN
UNIVERSITY**

NSU IRB APPROVED:
Approved: April 14, 2022
Expired: Exempt
IRB#: 2022-189

Recruitment email

Dear Participant,

My Name is Otis G. Jarvis, and I am a doctoral candidate at Nova Southeastern University currently conducting research on the lived- experiences of African American Senior Executives in fortune 500 organizations. I am seeking your participaton or anyone who is who may be eligible for this study. Please see below for the list of criteria for eligibility for my study.

I have had the pleasure of working over 25 years working in a diverse background of areas to include banking, investments, insurance, bankcard, real estate, and academia. I am passionate about studying the relationships in organizations as it intersects with interpersonal, organizational, and leadership conflicts.

My research will involve an interview via face-to-face, phone, Skype, or Zoom at a time or location convenient for you and will require 45-60 minutes of your time. During the interview I will ask questions about your lived experiences as an African American Senior Executive in a Fortune 500 organization.

To participate in the study, we need:

- ☐ People who are former or current African American Senior Executives
- ☐ People who are willing to volunteer without compensation
- ☐ People who are willing to volunteer 45-60 minutes of their time to be interviewed at their convenience.
- ☐ People who are willing to share their lived experiences.

Sincerely,

Otis G. Jarvis

(804) 502-7032
ojarvs@mynsu.nova.edu

Appendix D

Example of Participant Theme and Coded Summary

Ambition:

PSE1: T/C

      I was the only senior manager at any level for 15 years at a payment processing company. My experience was fine, but I will say a few things. For one, I don't wake up in the morning and think that I'm a Black person like most people. I really wake up in the morning and you think about my day and other things like getting ready to go to work or you know the children whatever you're thinking about things you need to do, or you want to accomplish and so at that time I will lose sight of fact that I know I was a Black executive. People who are seeing me and experiencing them. When I am experiencing them, I don't think necessarily thinking about them being white, but I have realized that at times everything was about me being Black and I say that because in those moments when it happens and then not necessarily in bad way etc. then you start realizing, you know, you're reminded of the differences.

PSE2: T/C

That is a big question, I think it has been good but that is because I have had good leaders who understood my values and who understood the need to have diversity within their organization. So, I would say the hurdles that other Black executives face, a lot of them were removed from me because once I had been in the organization for so long before I became an executive. I have a good record. I

have people around the organization who knew me, my work and were willing to sponsor me so I benefited from that for 25 years here. I have been an executive since. I think in 2015. And when I think about it a lot of time, most of my time here has not been as an executive, so it is great to be one now.

PSE3: T/C

Well, with my current company it is going well. I am working my way up slowly but surely trying to understand everything. I do not have anything negative to say. It has been a good start. Prior to this I was a senior manager for 12 years at my prior company and it started truly well. And let us just say I left on my own terms. It is confidential, but things got ugly in the end. However, things were great there when I started, of course. While there for 12 years, I was able to network my way up to the top, but I do not like the way it ended.

PSE4: T/C

I would say I have succeeded mostly through word of mouth. Things are now coming together after all some years now. I am meeting other executives around the country people. I am sitting down with top executives in the company. My biggest challenge was getting used to my position. It was not about working in corporate America; it is because I spent years in the military as a high-ranking officer. The organizational structure is different here from the military. It was the transition from the military to the civilian world that was challenging because of the skill set that was not readily transferable from a corporate standpoint. I had to constantly make sure that despite that, I would bring excellence to the job.

PSE5: T/C

I started with the bank when I was 18 years old when I was in college. I started as an associate. Based on the years of service I have been with the bank for 37 years. I've had several mentors, and I've been mentored, and I've mentored other colleagues on the corporate team. Having specific mentors is important. I do not think I would be here if I did not have mentors. Mentorship is extremely important. I understand the importance of mentoring. A key thing to succeed is, you must be aggressive enough to move forward, you must have the right mentality, and you will be making an excellent choice by finding a mentor. I think finding a mentor is a good decision. I have had a mentor and it is excellent.

PSE6: T/C

What I would say about my experiences is early in my career it was a bit challenging working in human resources at an early age. It wasn't easy, not that it should have been. A couple years ago I moved to a larger organization away from tech companies. Those companies that I don't think you need to know. As an African American male while I was there, I had no one to teach me anything or mentor me. For instance, I was the first person in my family to work in corporate America. I come from a line of teachers and social workers - family that works in the public sector, so I was the first one in corporate America. I never had the opportunities even with family members or other people who had the experiences working in corporate America. I had built up informal networks at a younger stage in my career. There is a significant advantage and importance of being able to prepare earlier for success. Having someone there to assist you (mentor)

helping you to prepare or having access to a mentor is good. It's harder for you when you're trying to compete when you don't have help. When I was younger in our community, you respected authority, you didn't challenge the authority or push back against people in authority. I didn't know how important it was for me to utilize my voice earlier in life. That was a bit of a detriment to me earlier in my career. When it came time to compete it made it hard for me to change; it was hard for me to sell myself early in my career. I had to learn the hard way to pivot, but now in my field of human resources as a leader in a leadership position you must influence other leaders in your organization and it's harder. It was harder for me.

I would say that African American human resource leaders, unlike some of the cultures, must be in a conversation. They must be able to pick things up easily and must be careful about biases. For example, when someone stereotypes females or female leaders in the organization, you know it is not because she's a driver, with extraordinarily strong leadership skills. They'll say something like, she's too aggressive, and that's a strong statement. So, women leaders were looked down upon. I also realize that as an African Americans it is important to have someone who is going to advocate for us on our behalf. I do not think that I really understood the differences early on in my career. As a vice president I now must identify someone to sponsor me.

PSE7: T/C

I would say that it was by accident that I stumbled into my field it was through an internship while in college ,and I knew that I didn't want to go back home in the

summer time and I knew that in order to avoid my dad finding me a job I had to get a job so I ended up doing an internship with Johnson and Johnson and that's how I ended up hearing about toxicology. While in college I never heard about the field, and so I accepted the internship position with J&J and was happy working in the lab and I was focused on finding drugs to treat arthritis and so when I was working there, I heard about this fear of toxicology. I heard about toxicology, and I said OK I could make a decent living doing this and next thing I know after the assignment was over, I graduated and then I enrolled in graduate school and that is how I started. My career has been excellent, I have had a lengthy career.

PSE8: C

How did I get here? I think that's a good question. I had a mentor who was a white male. I struggled to understand with the fact of, why he was so willing to invest in and open his self to me, a Black woman. He made me understand that it was not he was just this benevolent guy. He made me feel like 'you are worthy,' you're smart, and you deserve my mentoring. When I left the military, I worked extremely hard. Yes, I had a military background. So, I was relentless about my goals. Later, I had an HR business partner who was a white woman and she advocated extensively for me also to get the SVP role I'm in now. I was able to secure a leadership position early in my career, earlier than I would have without their help."

PSE9: T/C

I first joined this company in 2017 after being a professional entrepreneur. I left that business to start my own law firm. I built my own law firm as well as a private equity group prior to working for a large law firm. My long-term goal was to be an executive, but I was running my own company. I needed to do something different, so I looked for an opportunity. I wanted something that would bring me a challenge. It would have been nice to make millions as an entrepreneur, but I wanted something in senior leadership. I established myself proving myself even though I run a business outside and a private equity group, I felt like I was in position beyond a senior level. My approach was first. It's the turtle who is more consistent and wins at the end. I took the approach of simply let me, give me an opportunity to demonstrate and I will exceed the expectations.

There were some leaders in the company that were uncomfortable with the color of my skin but, I wanted to show them that I brought that extra energy to get into the game meaning that there would be projects or assignments that would not necessarily fit my creativity or would take a lot out of the box to get it done. I think that the fact that I demonstrated the capacity early in my career to take on things that were big higher risks and I did not have a fear of failing. I was doing some things well and there was an individual moving up and moving out and I was recommended to succeed him. I took a big leap running power companies as a lawyer by training and running private equity. For some operations we really didn't have anything in a bag to run a power company.

PSE10: T/C

For me, so I decided to make a jump to corporate America from the military. I had

made a promise to myself that I would get an advanced degree so when I got

there, I decided to learn the language of corporate America. So, I could get a seat

at the table I was committed to going back to a top graduate school and even

though I was anxious it was a new thing and a new responsibility, and I was

seeking a new opportunity. This was an opportunity for me to do that. I was hired

to do better. In brand marketing, I had increased responsibilities and that

propelled me to become a senior director. The most important thing was getting

an advanced degree, and then I got a good understanding of the organization, the

language, the culture, establishing networks, and mentors and that's how it started.

PSE11: T/C

I got here first; it was the dedication to work in human resources. I have ambitious

standards so learning about human resources as an undergraduate was necessary

to go far in my career. I went to university just to kind of figure out what I wanted

to do, then I had a job with Sprint, at the headquarters starting in human

resources, and that gave me a foundation for understanding the company. It was a

wonderful place to work, you were able to set your foundation and I moved up the

field in different areas of HR. I developed a good understanding of employment

law and public relations policies and the things that help you in human resources.

That knowledge eventually got me to a senior leadership position in the

organization. Sprint was my first Fortune 100 company that I worked for, and I

was involved with disputes with unions. I was also a senior leader with HP for 13

years.

Appendix E

Interview Timeline

Semi-structured Interview Log

Participant Code	Date of interview	Permission	Format	Duration
PSE1	5/4/2022	Yes	Zoom/Digital Rec	49 Mins
PSE2	5/11/2022	Yes	Zoom/Digital Rec	36 Mins
PSE3	5/14/2022	Yes	Zoom/Digital Rec	31 Mins
PSE4	5/15/2022	Yes	Zoom/Digital Rec	31 Mins
PSE5	5/20/2022	Yes	Zoom/Digital Rec	30 Mins
PSE6	5/20/2022	Yes	Zoom/Digital Rec	41 Mins
PSE7	5/22/2022	Yes	Zoom/Digital Rec	29 Mins
PSE8	5/24/2022	Yes	Zoom/Digital Rec	30 Mins
PSE9	5/25/2022	Yes	Zoom/Digital Rec	49 Mins
PSE10	5/27/2022	Yes	Zoom/Digital Rec	56 Mins
PSE11	5/27/2022	Yes	Zoom/Digital Rec	44 Mins

Appendix F

Data Collection Process

1. Process of collecting data

2. IRB research protocol, letter, flyer, and informed consent emailed via LinkedIn, direct email, word of mouth, referrals.

3. Emails and follow up emails

4. Phone calls

5. Pre-Screenings

6. Verbal agreement and subsequent scheduled interviews and request consent forms

7. Interview Video recordation

8. Interview digital recording

9. Interview Transcribe notes

10. Record when interview started

11. I stayed within the written procedures approved by the IRB committee.

12. Duration of the interview's min to min

13. Review transcribed notes, video, and detail audio recordings

14. Follow up for accuracy

15. Member checking technique for trustworthiness

16. Review video and digital recordings

17. Review transcribed notes

18. Review video and digital recordings

Appendix G

Interview Questions

Semi-structured Interview Questions

1. Please state your name and title.

2. Where did you grow up?

3. Where were you born?

4. What is your highest level of education?

5. How would you describe your experiences as an AASE in a Fortune 500 organization? How did you get here?

6. What challenges have you face in your career or in your organization?

7. What major successes have you accomplished? (career)

8. Who or what events do you attribute your success?

9. Describe your best practices for success?

10. What system have you developed as leader to help you resolve conflicts at work?

11. What have you contributed to your organization? What value have you created/add?

12. What role does DE&I play in your organization?

13. What can all Fortune 500 organizations do better when hiring the best workforce?

14. In your own words, how do you describe yourself as a leader? What is your leadership style?

15. What advice would you give an aspiring future AASE?