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Exploring the Role of Soft Skills Amongst African American Women Navigating Barriers to Achieving Corporate Leadership

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Exploring the role of soft skills amongst African American women navigating barriers to
achieving corporate leadership

by

Latoya Newell Burke

A dissertation submitted to the Nathan M. Bisk College of Business of
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Abstract

TITLE: Exploring the role of soft skills amongst African American women navigating barriers to achieving corporate leadership

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KEY WORDS: African American Women, Soft Skills, Barriers, Leadership, KSAOs, Human Capital Theory, Human Capital Resources

This study sought to explore the role of soft skills in African American women's ascension to corporate leadership as they navigate and overcome barriers. The disparity of African American women in corporate leadership is longstanding. African American women's corporate American experience is distinct and often fraught with difficulties. In order to overcome the obstacles they encountered while pursuing executive leadership, this study investigated if soft skills were thought to be a crucial skill required. The study fills a gap in research that addresses African American women specifically. Previous studies have addressed the barriers that African American women face in corporate America while omitting the discussion of strategies to overcome these barriers. Previous studies have also discussed the plight of women in corporate America without a lone discussion of African American women. This study utilized the phenomenological qualitative approach to understand the lived experience of African American women in corporate America as they ascend to corporate leadership. The researcher interviewed twenty participants to collect data. Through data analysis, themes emerged that addressed the role of soft skills in African American women's ability to ascend to leadership and overcome barriers. The research

findings suggest that soft skills play a vital role in African American women's ascension and ability to navigate barriers to corporate leadership. The implications of these findings show that African American women's soft skills are individual KSAOs that serve as human capital resources that add value to organizations. Therefore, organizations must recognize and foster the value of African American women in leadership.

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my Daddy Will. May he rest in power. He would be proud to know that I have earned another degree, despite my adamancy about never returning to school. He was always fully supportive and proud of all of my educational achievements. This is also dedicated to my son, Noah. May you look at my achievements and know that all things are possible with God and hard work. Always do your best and God will do the rest!

This dissertation is for all of the African American women striving for excellence in corporate America. May you forever know that your journey is not unseen. Keep working hard, striving, attaining, and excelling.

Chapter 1: Introduction

Overview

Through the years, diversity has remained a challenge for many organizations. Due to many organizations' diversity challenges, diversity and inclusion initiatives have gained growing traction. Though organizations give specific attention and initiatives to the need for diversity within organizations, there remains a diversity deficit within the leadership positions of these organizations. The argument for diversity in leadership posits that increased diversity across gender and ethnic groups add value to organizations' decision-making processes (Larcker & Tayan, 2016). Larcker and Tayan (2016) also argue that increased diversity in leadership demonstrates fairness. Furthermore, increased diversity can lead to equality in leadership opportunities that allow for equal leadership access for all qualified (Larcker & Tayan, 2016). Despite the evolution of diversity and inclusion initiatives amongst companies, there remains a gap in diversity within corporate leadership roles.

As of 2019, only 3.2% of senior or executive leaders within Fortune 500 companies are black, including CEOs of 0.4% of African-American women (Coqual, 2019; Wilkie, 2022). Currently, 86% of CEOs in Fortune 500 companies are white males (Wilkie, 2022). Due to the lack of diversity company-wide, diversity, and inclusion programs have increased over the last two decades (Schoen & Rost, 2021). Although organizations search for ways to approach the diversity challenge, and research provides diversity management strategies, diversity in the

executive and senior leadership roles remains dismal. While diversity remains a challenge, including African American women remains an even more pressing challenge.

Systematic barriers to corporate leadership contribute to African American women's lack of diversity and inclusion program success (Beckwith et al., 2016; Erskine et al., 2021; Wilkie, 2022). Previous research has shown that African American women who aspire to achieve the C-suite and other corporate leadership roles successfully navigate these barriers. Literature has explained that the barriers to leadership roles include but are not limited to stereotyping, exclusion from informal networks, organizational culture, organizational systems, tokenism, and implicit bias (Erskine et al., 2021; Kandola, 2004; Kilian et al., 2005). Research has shown that mentorship and sponsorship benefit African American women along their corporate journey to leadership. Mentorship, sponsorship, and leadership training development mitigate barriers such as exclusion from informal networks, stereotypes, and implicit bias (Hewlett et al., 2012; Kandola, 2004). From an organizational standpoint, effective diversity management that fosters an inclusive environment mitigates some of the organizations' systematic barriers (Johns, 2013; Kandola, 2004).

Although research studies (Hewlett et al., 2012; Johns, 2013; Kandola, 2004; Kombarakaran et al., 2008; Randel et al., 2021; Sales et al., 2020) have offered ways for African American women to navigate barriers, these studies failed to offer specific techniques or skills that would aid in this process. Kandola (2004)

mentioned that organizations must focus on leadership skill-building, and Kombarakaran et al. (2008) focused on executive coaching that builds skills for aspiring minority leaders. However, neither study mentioned specific skills for African American women to overcome barriers while climbing the corporate ladder. Hewlett et al. (2012) and Randel et al. (2021) focused on building sponsor and mentorship relationships while failing to discuss the process or skills needed to form those relationships.

This study adds value to understanding how soft skills impact African American women's ability to navigate barriers to attain a corporate leadership position. Kandola (2004) and Kombarakaran et al. (2008) mentioned skill-building as a tactic used to overcome the barriers faced by African American women during their corporate journey, which is supported by the human capital theory (Becker, 1964). Based on the human capital theory, human capital investment benefits the individual, organization, and economy. Skill-building, proposed by Kandola (2004) and Kombarakaran et al. (2008), would increase the human capital of African American women. This allows them to serve as an organization's human capital resource through their acquired skills, talents, knowledge, abilities, and experiences. Ployhart and Moliterno (2011) differentiate between non-cognitive and cognitive skills that fit into the human capital resource model. Soft skills are synonymous with non-cognitive skills. Ployhart and Moliterno (2011) proposed that non-cognitive and cognitive skills complement each other to create human capital resources. Human capital resources positively impact an organization's

outcomes. African American women can add to the organization's human capital resources by acquiring the soft skills necessary for effective leadership (DeLany & Rogers, 2004; Ployhart & Moliterno, 2011; Ployhart et al., 2014; Sims & Carter, 2019). Based on the human capital theory, human capital resource framework, and strategies identified to overcome barriers to leadership positions, this study will show the role of soft skills in mitigating barriers to corporate leadership.

Background and Rationale for the Study

According to previous studies (Areiqat et al., 2020; Davis, 2018; Esty et al., 1995; Hewlett et al., 2012; Holder et al., 2015;), workplace diversity has long been a concern that firms have addressed for many years. Previous research (Krishnan, 2020; Sue et al., 1998) has also shown that diversity increases the firm's overall performance. Research shows that diversity in leadership remains difficult despite the growing understanding of the need for diversity and the plethora of diversity management initiatives. The paucity of African American women in leadership positions, in particular, remains an even greater concern. As our understanding of diversity has grown, minorities and women have made significant progress in securing their position in the workforce (Holder et al., 2015). Hewlett et al. (2012) discovered that since the civil rights movement, when segregation and discrimination were made illegal, minorities had progressed in the workplace. Nevertheless, African American women still face barriers to executive leadership roles. To date, only three African American women have ever held a CEO position in a Fortune 500.

Historically, studies have focused on the lack of diversity of women in the workforce (Loden, 1978; Morrison, 1992; Sue et al.). These studies coined the term glass ceiling while omitting the struggles of African-American women.

Researchers created the term concrete ceiling to acknowledge the plight of African American women in corporate America (Ray & Davis, 1988). The studies of African American women in corporate America show that while women have to face the glass-ceiling barriers, African American women face barriers that extend beyond those of other women (Catalyst, 2009; Combs, 2003; Davidson & Davidson, 1997; Dickens & Chavez, 2018; Hite, 1996; Ray & Davis, 1988).

African American women are a dual minority; therefore, they are in a unique group that faces unique challenges. Combs (2003) found that this dual minority status has caused African American women to experience lower promotion rates, job segregation, and social out-group status, which are barriers. Other studies have explained the barriers that they face in corporate America, including myths and stereotypes about job capabilities, occupational segregation, lack of mentors, exclusion from networks, lack of meaningful assignments, corporate culture, organizational systems, implicit bias, the historical impact of slavery, limited access to power, and the emotional tax (Beckwith et al., 2016; Bell, 1992; Erskine et al., 2021; The Federal Glass Ceiling Commission, 1995; Giscombe & Mattis, 2002; Holder et al., 2015; Johns, 2013; Kandola, 2004; Key et al., 2012; Kilian et al., 2005)

The government attempted to take action against the inequities of African American women and other minorities with Affirmative Action legislation. Parker (2005), Pompper (2011), and Johnson (2015) studied the effects of these initiatives used to help end discrimination in the workplace and found that these programs failed to benefit African American women. In addition to legislative initiatives, organizations have implemented diversity management strategies and techniques. Studies have explored the effect of diversity management initiatives (Hewlett et al., 2012; Kandola, 2004; Kombarakaran et al., 2008; Sales et al., 2020). Nix (2022), Tomasdottir (2021), and Wilkie (2022) pointed out that in recent years organizations have increased diversity and inclusion efforts in order to address the inequities of minorities. Catalyst (2021) presented a study that shows these initiatives have failed African American women. The study showed that African American women hold 4.1% of management positions that could lead to C-suite positions, while white women held 32.8% (Catalyst, 2021). The disparity still exists today.

Though limited access to mentors is one of the obstacles for African American women in corporate America, studies have shown that mentorship relationships and sponsorships help African American women overcome barriers (Hewlett et al., 2012; Kandola, 2004; Kombarakaran et al., 2008; Sales et al., 2020). Sales et al. (2020) added that African American women should also invest in their social capital to navigate these obstacles. While the literature has provided organizational and individual strategies to assist African American women in

overcoming barriers, it lacks discussion of the skills necessary to execute and overcome these strategies. Sales et al. (2020) suggested that African American women tackle these obstacles by investing in themselves. Mumford et al. (2000) suggested that leadership opportunities should be available to everyone with the necessary skills. This study explores the role of soft skills in an African American woman's ability to navigate barriers. Additionally, the current study will evaluate the role of soft skills in an African American women's ability to network to gain mentors or sponsors. This study is based on the human capital theory (Becker, 1964). This theory provides a framework for investigating the importance of soft skills in an African American woman's capacity to ascend throughout her career journey. The human capital theory is a foundation for understanding why organizational leaders should be concerned with the lack of African American women in corporate leadership roles. It further supports human capital investment in African American women, where they acquire the necessary skills for leadership. Acquiring these skills enables them to serve as human capital resources for organizations through their unique skills, abilities, talents, and experiences.

Statement of the Problem

African American women face unique challenges in corporate America that hinder their ability to attain corporate leadership roles. African American women are a dual minority, affecting their career progress. As of 2019, only 3.2% of senior or executive leaders within Fortune 500 companies are black, including 0.4% of African American women CEOs (Coqual, 2019; Wilkie, 2022). African American women held 14.2% of all management positions in 2020, compared to 18.1% for

white women (Catalyst, 2021). When those roles are narrowed down to those that lead to the C-suite, African American women hold 4.1% of those posts, while white women occupy 32.8% (Catalyst, 2021). According to LeanIn.Org and McKinsey and Company, just 58 African American women get promoted to manager for every 100 males, although African American women apply for advancements at the same rate (Lean In & McKinsey and Company, 2020). In addition, only 64 African American women are hired into executive positions for every 100 men (Lean In & McKinsey and Company, 2020). Larcker and Tayan (2020) studied the composition of the C-suite in Fortune 100 companies and found a race and gender disparity. Figure 1 shows the minimal diversity in the C-suite with 25 companies with all-white suites, 9 with no females, and only 13 with greater than 33% of an all-white C-suite (Larcker & Tayan, 2020). Although black women were not depicted in this study, the gap is evident when looking at females and minorities.

Figure 1

Diversity Composition of C-Suite of Fortune 100 Companies

Sample Characteristics	
Total Companies	100
Total # C-Suite Executives ^a	1,007
Average # Executives in C-Suite	10
Total # CEOs ^b	101
Total # Direct Reports (C+1)	906
Average # Direct Reports	9
Largest # Direct Reports ^c	16
Smallest # Direct Reports ^d	3
Female Representation in C-Suite	
# Companies with no females in C-Suite ^e	9
# Companies with no females in C+1 ^f	9
# Companies with female CEO ^g	7
# Companies with $\geq 33\%$ female C-Suite	27
# Companies with $\geq 40\%$ female C-Suite	10
# Companies with $\geq 50\%$ female C-Suite ^h	2
Ethnically Diverse Representation in C-Suite	
# Companies with all white C-Suite	25
# Companies with all white C+1 ⁱ	26
# Companies with non-white CEO	16
# Companies with $\geq 33\%$ non-white C-Suite	13
# Companies with $\geq 40\%$ non-white C-Suite ^j	5
# Companies with $\geq 50\%$ non-white C-Suite ^k	2

Note. This figure is provided by “Diversity in the C-suite: The Dismal State of Diversity Among Fortune 100 Senior Executives” by David Larcker and Brian Tayan, 2020, *Rock Center for Corporate Governance: Stanford Closer Look Series*.

Even though the number of African American women in leadership across organizations remains low, it does not discredit that African American women can be dynamic leaders. Their experiences through their journey have gained the skills and attributes that allow them to be dynamic leaders. Studies have shown that African American women gain leadership skills through unique experiences (Byrd, 2009; DeLany & Rogers, 2004; Parker, 2005; Parker & Ogilvie, 1996; Sims & Carter, 2019). These leadership skills give African American women the ability to be influential leaders. African American women as leaders bring a unique skill set

to organizations due to the challenges that they have faced. Research has identified African American women's attributes as leaders, including the ability to network, empower, and promote solidarity (Byrd, 2009; Rosser-Mims, 2010; Sims & Carter, 2019). African American women leaders exhibit specific characteristics, including innovation, risk-taking, diverse thinking, and complexity in their conduct (Parker & Ogilvie, 1996). Davis (2016) identified the skills that African American women used to navigate the challenges in leadership as emotional intelligence, authenticity, agility, and resilience. Many of these skills can fit into the categories of soft skills. Despite the many attributes that they bring to an organization, the lack of African American women in corporate leadership roles remains dismal. Organizations may understand the need for diversity in leadership; however, their challenge to place African American women in these positions remains longstanding. Governmental programs, organizational initiatives, and strategies to combat the disparity for African American women are all in place; however, African American women's state in corporate America's executive leadership roles remains bleak.

The disparity of African American women in executive leadership is longstanding (Key et al., 2012). There have been strategies, programs, and diversity and inclusion initiatives, but a significant gap remains. Over recent years, there has been a growing concern to address the disparity within corporate America. African American women continuously seek to understand what they can do to close this gap. Mumford et al. (2000) assert that those with a specific skill set can become leaders. Mumford identifies these skills as technical, human, and conceptual skills.

African American women have a unique set of skills that allow them to add value to organizations (Davis, 2016). It is crucial to identify how African American women can utilize their skills acquired or gain new skills to benefit them in their navigation of the barriers to corporate leadership roles. Understanding the role of soft skills will allow African American women to emphasize the building and utilization of these skills as they ascend. This study will explore the role of soft skills in African American women's ability to navigate barriers to attain corporate leadership roles.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore how African American women professionals utilize soft skills to navigate barriers to corporate leadership positions within an organization. This study described the common meaning and trends for African American professionals who have navigated barriers as they attempt to elevate to corporate leadership positions. It sought to discover what role soft skills play in the journey of African American women leaders as they seek to attain corporate leadership roles. African American women have a unique corporate American journey that includes many barriers and obstacles. This study explored whether soft skills were considered a significant skill essential in navigating the barriers they faced as they pursued executive leadership. This study's implications raise awareness of the significant role of soft skills in African American women's ability to attain leadership roles. It will further alert African American women on the importance of cultivating soft skills.

This study further sought to fill a gap in research to address how African American women navigate barriers to executive-level positions in corporate America. Previous studies (Krishnan, 2020; Lekchiri & Kamm, 2020; Loden, 1978; Morrison, 1992; Sue et al., 1998; Taylor & Kennedy, 2003) have addressed minorities and women in general; however, using African American women studies alone is lacking (Combs, 2003; Hewlett et al., 2012; Holder et al., 2015; Key et al., 2012;). Previous studies have discussed the barriers that African American women encounter in corporate America (Beckwith et al., 2016; Catalyst, 2021; Davidson & Davidson, 1997; Erskine et al., 2021; The Federal Glass Ceiling Commission, 1995; Giscombe & Mattis, 2002; Johns, 2013; Kandola, 2004; Kilian et al., 2005). The Kandola (2004), Kombarakaran et al. (2008), Hewlett et al. (2012), Johns (2013), and Sales et al. (2020) studies then offered strategies and methods to overcome these barriers. Prior research has found that African American women need to increase their network to gain mentors and sponsors to increase their chances of attaining leadership roles (Hewlett et al., 2012; Jenkins, 2005; Messmer, 1998; Randel et al., 2021). Previous literature also discussed soft skills' role in gaining networks and navigating their professional careers (De Janasz & Forret, 2008; Iyengar, 2017; Smith et al., 2019). However, the literature does not discuss how soft skills may impact their ability to gain mentors and sponsorship, navigate barriers, and attain corporate leadership positions. This study sought to show that attaining soft skills may serve a three-fold purpose. First, soft skills play a role in the ability of African American women to navigate barriers along their journey in

corporate America. Second, soft skills impact African American women's ability to gain access to mentors and sponsors through networking. Third, soft skills play a role in African American women's leadership capabilities. Soft skills is a term that includes various meanings, which makes it ambiguous. To clarify the meaning for this study, the list of skills studied will be narrowed. Because this study will focus on African American women's journey in corporate leadership, this study will only focus on those skills defined by the Center for Creative leadership found in Kalman (2012) as the top ten leadership soft skills:

- Self-awareness
- Learning agility
- Emotional intelligence
- Resiliency
- Building relationships at all levels
- Political savvy
- Motivating and engaging others
- Building and leading effective teams
- Communication
- Creating a culture of trust and respect (pp. 1-2)

This research explored their unique perspectives and experiences outside of any other minority group. Focusing on African American women highlights the state of diversity in corporate leadership about African American women, disaggregating this group from other minorities. This study utilized a qualitative method to explore

and understand the individual experiences of African American women seeking an executive leadership role. The study was transcendental phenomenological approach to understand the lived experience of African American women in corporate America who choose to ascend to corporate leadership.

Questions that Guide the Research

The literature lacks African American women in corporate America, which leaves many questions unanswered. After completing a literature review, gaps in the literature were revealed. While the challenges women face in the workplace are vastly studied, there remains a lack of literature on African American women. Based on these gaps, questions emerged for this study.

The following questions will guide the research:

Research Question: What role do soft skills play in African American women's ascension to corporate leadership roles within an organization?

Sub question 1: How does the acquisition of soft skills impact African American women's ability to break barriers to corporate leadership roles within an organization?

Definition of Terms

Often, terms have different meanings with no universal meaning for a specific word. Additionally, words or terms could be used in different contexts and meanings. Therefore, it is necessary to define the terms used in this study. For this study, the researcher will use the following definitions:

African American Women

African American and Black Americans are often used interchangeably to describe a group of people's ethnicity and race (Agyemang et al., 2005). African Americans are a group of people and their offspring of African origin; many are descendants of enslaved people (Agyemang et al., 2005). Black American refers to people of darker skin but is unrelated to ethnicity (Agyemang et al., 2005). "African American women are a group of individuals who possess qualities that do not entitle them to access to societal resources and participation in salient institutions at a rate comparable to that of the privileged class or those who are positioned higher on the social hierarchy of discrimination" (Jewell, 2012, p. 10). For the purpose of this research, African American and Black American women are used interchangeably to describe women of black or dark skin.

Barriers:

According to the Federal Glass Ceiling Commission (1995), there are various hurdles to women and minorities obtaining top management positions. They divided the hurdles into four categories: societal, governmental, internal business, and organizational structure. According to the Federal Glass Ceiling Commission (1995), sociocultural barriers connect to issues that limit opportunities, such as bias and prejudice. The term concrete ceiling describes African-American women's experiences in the workplace (Davidson & Davidson, 1997). Ray and Davis (1988) used the concrete ceiling to emphasize that while women confront a glass ceiling of barriers as they work their way up the corporate ladder, African American women suffer extra challenges and barriers. Davidson and Davidson (1997) contrasted the

glass ceiling that women face with men's concrete ceiling, claiming that the concrete ceiling is worse and comes with distinct obstacles

Corporate Ladder:

Arthur and Rousseau (1996) refer to the corporate ladder as hierarchical progression within an organization, including all work experiences and employability over time.

Corporate Leadership:

Corporate leadership includes executives and managers who make decisions and run the company. Corporate leadership manages the company's resources effectively (Robin, 2022).

C-suite:

The C-suite includes a team of executives that extends beyond the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) (Guadalupe et al., 2014). The size of the c-suite has grown over the years to include more positions that report to the CEO (Rajan & Wulf, 2006). Rajan and Wulf (2006) define the c-suite as the managers that report directly to the CEO. Edward Drummond and Company (2017) explain that the c-suite includes the top executives in the organization, referred to as C-level executives. However, c-suite extended to include top decision-makers despite their titles (Edward Drummond and Company, 2017). This small group includes persons in positions of actual authority and responsibility such as functional managers, regardless of their title (Edward Drummond and Company, 2017).

Diversity:

The Association of Research Libraries (ARL) defined diversity using a broad spectrum of characteristics contributing to overall diversity (Association of Research Libraries, 1998). The two categories prescribed were: primary and secondary (Association of Research Libraries, 1998). According to Jones (2014), diversity is a person's characteristics that make up their individual differences. The primary characteristics are those that are determined biologically, which a person has no control over (Jones, 2014). Primary characteristics include sexual orientation, ethnic background, gender, and race (Jones, 2014). Secondary characteristics can be controlled and are not biological, including the level of education, personality type, religious affiliation, and economic status (Jones, 2014).

Executive Leadership:

The executive leadership team makes up the c-suite. Guadalupe et al. (2014) define executive leadership of an organization as those leaders who report directly to the CEO. Executive leadership refers to an organization's senior and top-level leadership (Day & Lord, 1988). Additionally, executive leadership includes the general manager or the head of a business unit (Martin, 2011). This study will use the c-suite and executive leadership interchangeably based on the definitions.

Human capital:

Becker (1994) defined human capital as "knowledge, information, skills, and health of individuals" (p. 1). Human capital is the combination of intelligence, skills, and knowledge that distinguishes each organization (Bontis et al., 1999).

Soft leadership skills:

Aldulaimi (2018) defined leadership soft skills as those that are crucial for a leader's ability to lead, including "social power, trust, mentoring, and coaching, prepare successions, supporting, intelligence, emotional intelligence, inspirational and cultural and diversity awareness" (p. 1).

Mentorship:

Mentorship is a significant instrument for professional development and advancement in one's career (Hunt & Michael, 1983). Mentoring involves giving their mentee career, psychological, and social advice for development (Kram, 1983). Mentors also help their mentees solve problems. Because mentors can occupy any level of an organization's hierarchy, they may or may not have the authority or political clout to affect professional choices that limit their mentee's opportunity for career advancement. (Kram, 1983).

Soft Skills:

Soft skills are not technical skills. The word was coined to distinguish between technical and cognitive skills because soft skills is a term that includes infinite categories (Touloumakos, 2020). They involve interpersonal and intrapersonal abilities (Hurrell et al., 2013). Grugulis and Vincent (2009) defined soft skills as "communication, problem-solving, team-working, an ability to improve personal learning and performance, motivation, judgment, leadership and initiative" (p. 598). Touloumakos (2020) defined soft skills using an expansive list that included: qualities, work ethic, volitions, attitudes, decision-making, analytical skills,

negotiation, conflict resolution, emotional labor, professional appearance, and cognitive processes.

Sponsorship:

Sponsorship is a long-term commitment between a top-level, influential leader (sponsor) and a younger and lower-level, less experienced employee (sponsee), with the goal of advancing the sponsee's career (Ang, 2018). In a sponsorship relationship, the sponsor does more than offer advice. The sponsor is an advocate and uses his or her influence with other executives to advocate for and benefit the sponsee (Ibarra, 2009). The sponsor can talk about the value and capabilities of the sponsee amongst other leaders within an organization to promote the sponsee's elevation (Ang, 2018). Additionally, the sponsor can open new opportunities for the sponsee while fighting for their promotion within an organization (Reskin, 1979; Wayne et al., 1999).

Significance of the Study

The lack of African American women in executive positions has long been a problem (Key et al., 2012). Despite policies, programs, and diversity and inclusion initiatives, a considerable gap exists. In recent years, there has been an increasing urge to address the disparity inside corporate America. This study will contribute to the research on the African American women gap in corporate leadership positions that have remained wide throughout history. Global organizations have invested in diversity and inclusion initiatives at a growing rate over the last decade. The government has enacted laws against discrimination and even laws and programs to enhance the placement of minorities and women in the

workplace. These laws have increased the chances for women in general; however, there has not been much improvement for African American women. Previous research has added to the literature by providing strategies that organizations and African American women can use to overcome the barriers that lead to this gap. However, none of the strategies mention the value of soft skills to African American women's plight in corporate America.

African American women have tried to figure out how to close the gap. This study offers insight into how African American women can take this issue into their own hands to help close the current gap. According to Mumford et al. (2000), anyone with a given skill set can become a leader. Mumford et al. (2000) divide these abilities into technical, human, and conceptual categories. African American women possess distinct abilities that enable them to offer value to businesses (Davis, 2016). It is critical to figure out how African American women may put their existing abilities to use or learn new ones to help them overcome obstacles to leadership roles. In addition, these abilities and skills will help them add value to any organization through their leadership capabilities.

This study will offer insight into the soft skills that African American women need to foster along their journey. It will also help organizations understand the skills that they should help cultivate in African American women leaders. Through this understanding, organizations will be able to recognize the benefit of the unique leadership skills that African American women bring to organizations. This research will also benefit existing C-suite members, who may serve as

mentors or sponsors for African American women. In sum, this research will fill the gap in the literature regarding African American women seeking leadership in corporate America. It will add value to existing executive leaders, African American women, and organizations.

Organization of Remainder of the Study

The remainder of this study is organized as follows:

Chapter 2 thoroughly discusses existing literature, theories, and studies regarding African American women in corporate America and the barriers they face. It begins with a historical overview of diversity and its role in the gap of African American leaders. It then discusses the literature barriers that African American women face, the navigation of those barriers, soft skills, and African American leadership.

Chapter 3 explains the methodology used in the study. The applicable worldview is described in this chapter, which is based on the researcher's epistemology. This chapter also covers the study's validity, research design, methodology, data gathering, ethical considerations, and analytic processes. In addition, the author explains the population, sample, and how the participants will be selected for this research.

Chapter 4 summarizes the study and presents the findings. This phenomenological study explored the experiences of African American women through the interviews of twenty participants. Categories and subsequently themes were produced from the data collected during the interviews. The themes support the research questions of the role of soft skills in African American women's

ascension to corporate leadership and how they utilize soft skills to overcome barriers to corporate leadership. The alignment of the findings and literature is also discussed in this chapter.

Chapter 5 discusses the implications of the results, assumptions, limitations, future research, and conclusion of the study. Recommendations are also provided from the results of the study. It provides a discussion of the contributions of this study to the field and recommendations for future research to further support the findings of this study.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Overview

Over the years, the number of African American women in corporate leadership roles within organizations has been minimal compared to other ethnic groups and males. Research has aimed to find the reasons for this disparity while offering suggestions on how to close the gap for African American women in leadership. Many of these studies focus on women without emphasizing African American women. This chapter will first summarize the relevant theory supporting the study of African American women's perspective in leadership roles, encompassing the challenges and obstacles they face as they climb the corporate ladder. The human capital theory conceptualizes how organizations are not taking advantage of the human capital brought to an organization by African American women leaders (Becker, 1964). Literature shows a positive relationship between organizational performance and investment in human capital (Becker, 1993, 1994, 2002; Bontis et al., 1999). African American women bring skills, abilities, talents, and experiences to organizations that can serve as human capital resources when leading to organizational outcomes (DeLany & Rogers, 2004; Ployhart & Moliterno, 2011; Sims & Carter, 2019). Research has shown that African American women develop a unique skill set due to the challenges that they have faced throughout their journey (Davis, 2016). The leadership soft skills that African American women possess to serve as knowledge, skills, abilities, and other characteristics (KSAOs), according to Ployhart and Moliterno (2011) and Ployhart et al. (2014). The skills they have developed align with the top ten leadership soft

skills researchers have identified (Kalman, 2012). The human capital resource framework (Ployhart et al., 2014), based on the human capital theory (Becker, 1964), serves as a basis for analysis of the role of soft skills in an African American women's corporate journey and her ability to add value to the organization.

Following the theoretical framework, this literature review discusses soft skills, their benefits to the organization, and a historical overview of African American women in the workplace and leadership positions.

Furthermore, it will show a gap in the literature concerning soft skills' roles in African American women's ability to navigate barriers to corporate leadership. Additionally, the literature provides ways to navigate the obstacles and barriers; however, the literature does not address the skills that aid in navigating these barriers. The literature does address the benefits of soft skills in the workplace. The literature lacks a discussion of the benefits of soft skills in an African American woman's ability to attain corporate leadership roles. However, the literature supports the assertion that soft skills play a role in African American woman's ability to break barriers.

Questions that Guide the Research

The following questions will guide the research:

Research Question: What role do soft skills play in African American women's ascension to corporate leadership roles within an organization?

Sub question 1: How does the acquisition of soft skills impact African American women's ability to break barriers to corporate leadership roles within an organization?

Human Capital Theory

Human Capital

Historically, the factors of production were considered labor, physical capital, and land, according to early economists (Becker, 1964; 1993; Mincer, 1962; Nafuko et al., 2004). Economic literature has expanded capital to include: “human capital, social capital, relational capital, organizational capital, financial capital, customer capital, intellectual capital, innovation capital, structural capital, and process capital” (Edvinsson & Malone, 1997, p. 57). Edvinsson and Malone (1997) explained that businesses are often challenged by the gap between the company’s value and its balance sheet. They purport that this gap represents the company’s true value, the indirect asset that includes human capital (Edvinsson & Malone, 1997).

The introduction of human capital was related to advancing economic research (Becker, 1993; Mincer, 1957, 1962; Schultz, 1961). Economists focused on the ability of the workers who designed and worked with the machines, which aided them in physical work (Kucharčíková, 2011). Human capital is about developing skills that are unique to each individual. To advance society, individuals must enhance their knowledge, abilities, and skills (Becker, 1994; Kucharčíková, 2011). Economists of the Chicago School in the 1960s focused on developing the human capital theory (Mincer, 1957; Schultz, 1961). Schultz (1961) was the leader of this school of thought. Schultz (1981) noted that innate and acquired skills must be considered for investment to expand. He further explained that innate and acquired skills form human capital (Schultz, 1981). During this era, the concept of

human capital appeared in the literature as economists searched for an explanation of the economy's growth. Economists described this growth as the residual factor but later described it as human capital (Schultz, 1961).

Prior to Schultz (1961), Mincer (1957, 1962), and Becker (1993), Adam Smith (1776) recognized human capital as the fourth factor of production. Smith (1828) omitted the term human capital from his discussion; however, he stated that the fourth factor is “the acquired and useful abilities of all the inhabitants or members of the society” (p.12). Smith (1828) explained that the ability to acquire such skills and talents would cost a person a real expense; therefore, it is a fixed and realized capital owed by that person. The talents acquired through education or study make up a person’s fortune solely owned by that person but contributes to the society of which that person is a member (Smith, 1828). Smith (1828) likens these talents and abilities to a machine or instruments of trade, which facilitates labor. The acquisition of talents and abilities comes at an expense; however, the expense is repaid by profits (Smith, 1828). Although Smith (1828) did not specifically use the term human capital, it is clear that he purported that human capital is an essential production factor.

Becker (1994) described human capital as a different type of capital. He explained that education, training courses, money spent on medical expenses, and lessons learned concerning virtues such as punctuality and honesty are examples of capital (Becker, 1994). These examples are considered capital because they improve a person’s health, earnings, and literary appreciation (Becker, 1994).

Becker (1994) defined human capital as “knowledge, information, skills, and health of individuals” (p. 1). According to Becker (2002), human capital is the most critical form of capital in the economy because it can create value for individuals, organizations, and society.

Human capital refers to the idea that a person's skills and abilities can create a stock of capital (Fix, 2021). According to Davenport and Prusak (1998), human capital is the inherent skills, tendencies, and personal drive that people possess, which make up the human capital they bring to the workplace. Bontis et al. (1999) called human capital the human factor within organizations. They further explained that human capital is the combination of intelligence, skills, and knowledge that distinguishes each organization, and this human factor of an organization fosters innovation and creation, which aids in the sustainability of an organization if the human capital is managed correctly (Bontis et al., 1999). The Bontis et al. (1999) study described human capital as three resource types: competencies, attitude, and intellectual agility. Competencies are skills and know-how. Attitude is top management's leadership qualities and ability to motivate. Intellectual agility is the organizational members' ability to remain adaptable and flexible while fostering innovation and entrepreneurship (Bontis et al., 1999).

As Bontis et al. (1999) referred to human capital as three resource types, the resource-based view research also included discussions of human capital. Barney (1991) defined resources to include “all assets, capabilities, organizational processes, firm attributes, information, knowledge controlled by a firm that enables

the firm to conceive of and implement strategies that improve its efficiency and effectiveness”(p. 101). Barney (1991) offered three categories of resources, including physical capital, human capital, and organizational capital. Training and development, experience, knowledge, judgment, relationships, and insight of specific managers and employees inside the firm are all examples of human capital resources Wright et al., (1994).

Drucker (1993) referred to human capital as knowledge capital. He proclaimed that this was a new kind of capital that would never subside, contrary to money capital (Drucker, 1993). Drucker (1993) agreed with Becker (1993, 1994, 2002) in his belief that human capital is the most valuable capital to an organization and society. Drucker (1993) argued that the economy is moving towards a knowledge-based economy that benefits from human capital because human capital is not the same for everyone. Those who hold knowledge capital have the ability to be skilled workers who are creative and can obtain professional management positions (Drucker, 1993). Laroche et al. (1999) also defined human capital from a knowledge-based view. They asserted that it encompasses all of a person's innate skills, knowledge, and abilities and anything they learn or gain throughout their lives (Laroche et al., 1999).

Ployhart et al. (2014) expanded the definition to organizational-level capacities, including individuals' knowledge, abilities, skills, and other characteristics (KSAOs). This definition stresses the organizational pool used in Wright et al. (1994) definition, which does not confine human capital to a person's

KSAOs. Although these individual talents and skills make up the individual, the individual brings these KSAOs to the organization, impacting the organization's capabilities (Becker, 1994, 2002; Ployhart et al., 2014; Wright et al., 1994). Schultz (1961) pointed out that when a resource is utilized effectively, it benefits the economy, organization, and the individual. Therefore, investment in human capital is a central idea of the human capital theory. According to Becker (1964, 2002), investment in human capital is crucial. It is crucial not only for the individual to invest but also for an organization's success.

Human Capital Investment

Human capital refers to an increase in investment in people's education and training so that education and training can improve a person's capabilities, leading to increased employment efficiency (Schultz, 1979). Schultz (1981) noted that investing in human capital, including innate and acquired skills, is essential to expand. According to Schultz (1981), human capital refers to increased investment in individual education and training. Individuals can strengthen their abilities through training and education while improving job performance. Human capital involves investments in education and training made by a single person or a group in any institution or organization (Blundell et al., 1999). Research further justified the inclusion of human capital by tying funds spent on schooling, training courses, and any lesson learned concerning virtues are investments into capital (Becker, 1994). Human capital differs from physical or financial capital because removing these assets from the owner is impossible once a person gains knowledge, skills,

values, or health. If a person gains financial or physical capital, it is possible to remove these assets from the person (Becker, 1994).

Education and training are the two most impactful investments made in human capital (Becker, 1994). Becker (1994) conducted a study that linked a raise in a person's income to high school and college graduation by taking the net of direct and indirect education costs. The study found that educated people earn above average, and the gap is much larger in less developed countries (Becker, 1994). Historically, the difference in earning average between those educated and non-educated until the early 1960s was between 40 and 50 percent. During the 1960s, there was a remarkable rise in the average earnings of educated people. Schultz (1961) purported that this growth was due to human capital; however, the average fell in the 1970s. Economists began to theorize that Americans were overeducated (Freeman, 1976). While economists such as Schultz (1961) and Becker (1993) believed that investments in human capital added value to the economy through increased earnings, Freeman (1976) argued that investments in education and training would always remain questionable. Murphy and Welch (1989) opposed Freeman's (1976) overeducated Americans theory and found that in the 1980s, the earnings for those with a college education rose to the highest level within the last fifty years. Murphy and Welch (1989) and Becker (1994) support the ideas of Schultz (1961) regarding the positive impact of human capital and investments in education and training.

The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development(OECD) is a 38-member intergovernmental economic organization that includes the United States (OECD, 1998). OECD member countries emphasize strategies regarding human capital investments to promote economic growth, employment, and societal improvements (OECD, 1998). As research has developed on human capital investment, individuals, organizations, and countries recognize that human capital is essential for success and sustainability (Becker, 1993; Murphy & Welch, 1989; OECD, 1998). OECD (1998) reported a positive relationship between educational attainment and market outcomes shown in labor measurements. OECD (1998) shows the positive effects of investments in human capital, specifically education.

Most human capital investments focus on education and skill development, which entails financial and intellectual advancement (Bryant & Javalgi, 2016; Papay et al., 2016). Bryant and Javalgi (2016) relied on previous empirical studies that supported the notion that human capital investment is essential to economic growth. The Effiok et al. (2012) study showed that human capital was directly related to a rise in GDP in developing countries, and Olimpia (2012) found the same relation in developed countries. Additionally, research studies show that education and training investments positively impact economic growth (Galor & Moav, 2004; Glaeser et al., 2004). Galor and Moav (2004), Glaeser et al. (2004), Effiok et al. (2012), and Olimpia (2012) support the arguments of Mincer (1962) and Becker (1964, 1992, 1994, 2002) that investing in human capital through education and training improves human capital, with subsequent implications on

productivity. Recent studies support the foundational arguments of human capital investments (Becker, 1964, 1992, 2002; Mincer, 1962) to show the implications of investment in education and training. The attainment of education is an indicator of the general knowledge and skills a person possesses and adds to the workforce (Capozza & Divella, 2019; McGuirk et al., 2015).

When individuals attain education or increase their human capital, the aggregate of their skills and knowledge adds value to the whole organization, economy, or society (Kim, 2018). Research has estimated that investments in human capital have a ten to thirty percent impact on the per capita income differences among countries (Kim, 2018). In addition to the economic impact, researchers argued that investing in human capital impacts society by reducing inequality. (Galor & Moav, 2004; Murphy & Topel, 2016). Governments increasingly recognize the importance of human capital investment; therefore, they are willing to fund education worldwide (Taylor, 2017). The Ngwakwe and Masuluke (2018) study discovered that investing in human capital can impact a company's net profit performance favorably, but the advantage will not immediately manifest. As a result, training and education should be viewed as an investment that benefits people, businesses, and governments in general (Murphy & Topel, 2016; Ngwakwe & Masuluke, 2018; Taylor, 2017).

Human Capital and the Organization

Recent studies (Habib et al., 2016; Murphy & Topel, 2016; Ngwakwe & Masuluke, 2018; Prajogo & Oke, 2016; Taylor, 2017) regarding organizational performance and human capital performance continue to support the assertions

made by Becker (1964, 1993, 2002) and Mincer (1957). Murphy and Topel (2016) show that investing in human capital benefits employees and firms. Investing in human capital allows people to develop more skills and knowledge, resulting in an organization's improved and more effective performance (Habib et al., 2016). The Habib et al. (2016) study assessed the benefits of training its employees on their performance. The study results showed that the level of employee training motivates them to enhance their performance, subsequently improving the organization's performance (Habib et al., 2016). Prajogo and Oke (2016) studied human capital investment in the service industry and found a positive relationship between human capital investment and rents. The practical implications of Prajogo and Oke (2016) encourage managers to seek ways to promote education and training to leverage human capital.

Wyatt and Frick (2010) sought to explain how to account for human capital investment using the theory presented by Becker (1964, 1993, 2002) and Mincer (1957, 1962). In their discussion, Wyatt and Frick (2010) distinguished between specific and general training. Wyatt and Frick (2010) supported the arguments of Becker (1964, 1993, 2002) and Mincer (1957, 1962) that general training generates worker productivity across industries, which enables worker marketability and mobility, thus, giving the worker the ability to earn higher wages (Wyatt & Frick, 2010). Alike and Aibieyi (2014) rely on Becker (1964) and Mincer (1962) to discuss the management implications of human capital investments to explain that all expenses paid for medical care, training, and education add to the well-being of

the individual and the organization. Alike and Aibieyi (2014) emphasize that all organizations need employees to succeed; therefore, it is in the organization's best interest to commit to the enhancement of education and training in the workplace. Organizations that do not find the importance of human capital investment through training and development are destined to success (Alike & Aibieyi, 2014).

Organizational capital is the organization's institutionalized skills and knowledge, often called structural capital (Edvinsson & Malone, 1997). Organizations increasingly emphasize human capital as the market reflects a need for more intangible assets (Khayinga & Muathe, 2018). Khayinga and Muathe (2018) explain that organizations focus less on tangible assets and emphasize human resources. As research and discussions of human capital investments have developed, organizations realize that employing the right people is a significant part of the equation to success (Khayinga & Muathe, 2018).

Mahroum (2007) suggested that human capital management is pertinent for an organization to remain competitive. Human capital management involves the ability to develop, deploy, and continuously recruit people (Mahroum, 2007). When an organization can manage human capital, a key pillar for success, it can maintain a competitive advantage in the industry (Mahroum, 2007). The Khayinga and Muathe (2018) study reviewed earlier studies discussing the relationship between human capital development and a firm's success. Khayinga and Muathe (2018) argue that a positive relationship exists between human capital development and a firm's performance; therefore, firms need to invest in human capital to

maintain the organization's skills. Khayinga and Muathe (2018) based their analysis on the resource-based view from the perspective that the organization's people are valuable resources. Wright et al. (2005) utilized data from forty-five business units to examine the relationships between human resource practices and a firm's performance. Wright et al. (2005) found that human resources practices and a firm's performance are strongly related. For resources to create a competitive advantage, they must be valuable, rare, inimitable, and have organizational support (Barney, 1995). Barney (1991) considers resources valuable when they can help an organization develop or implement strategies that improve the effectiveness of the organization. According to Barney (1991), resources are valuable when they aid an organization in developing or implementing strategies that improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the firm. Using Barney (1995), the Wright et al. (2005) study concluded that human capital is a valuable, critical resource that fosters organizational sustainability; therefore, firms must manage human capital effectively.

Like Wright et al. (2005), Rompho (2017) investigated the connection between firm performance and human capital. The Rompho (2017) study found that human capital is one factor that contributes to an organization's competitive advantage, whereas other studies supported human capital as the most significant factor within an organization (Faggian et al., 2019; Nerdrum, 2001; Teixeira & Queiros, 2016). Human capital is a combination of intangible resources within a workforce that is connected to a firm's productivity through its abilities, skills,

talents, health, and knowledge (Faggian et al., 2019; Nerdrum, 2001; Teixeira & Queiros, 2016). An individual's ability to add value to an organization through skills, talents, and knowledge that enables problem-solving and decision-making is an intangible resource (Goldin, 2016). As an intangible resource, human capital must be developed as part of an organization's strategy to increase employee productivity and sustain a competitive advantage (Chidozie & Chukwuma, 2016). Human capital development contributes to the individual, organization, and economy. Human capital development expands knowledge and skills that benefits the organization by creating competitive advantage while promoting economic growth and improving individual life (Chidozie & Chukwuma, 2016; Pasban & Nojede, 2016)

Human Capital Theoretical Framework

The human capital theory's primary tenet is that people are equally important to producing products and services as other resources. The central idea is people's ability to learn and acquire skills and knowledge (Becker, 1964, 1994, 2002; Mincer, 1962; Schultz, 1961). Schultz (1961) pointed out that when a resource is utilized effectively, it benefits the economy, organization, and the individual. Literature has recognized the stock of skills, talents, knowledge, and experiences individuals possess as human capital (Becker, 1993, 1994, 2002; Bontis et al., 1999; Davenport & Prusak, 1998; Fix, 2021; Schultz, 1981). Thus, individuals possess human capital that can be leveraged to benefit the individual, organization, and economy (Murphy & Topel, 2016; Ngwakwe & Masuluke, 2018; Taylor, 2017;). Literature across disciplines developed the human capital construct

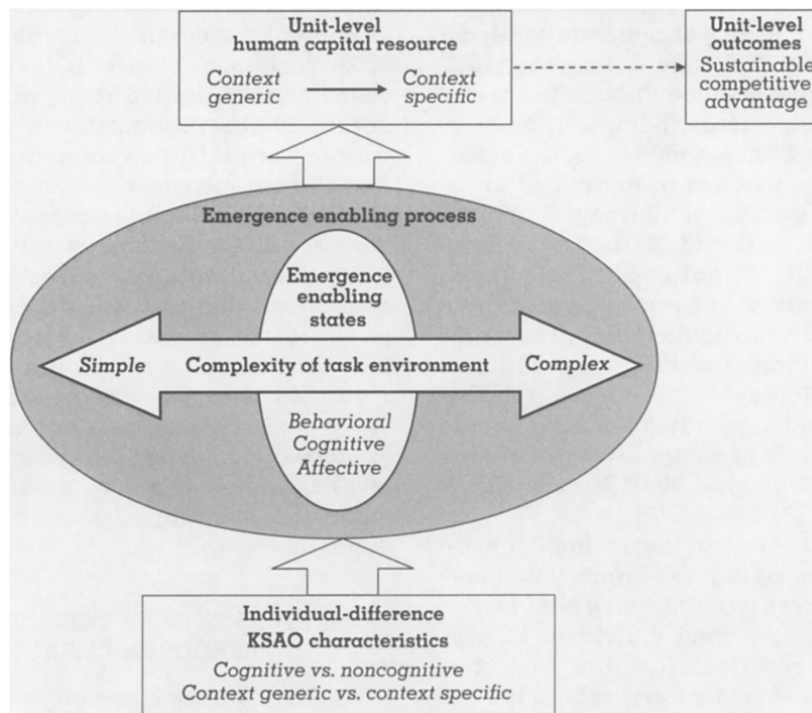
at the micro and macro levels. In human resource management, scholars studied the human capital construct at the individual level, while strategy scholars studied the human capital construct at the organizational level (Barney, 1991; Becker, 1994, 2002; Bontis et al., 1999; Wright et al., 1994; Wright & McMahan, 2011). At the micro-level, researchers have studied how an individual's knowledge, skills, talents, experiences, abilities, and other characteristics impact the individual's performance (Wyatt & Frick, 2010). At the macro-level, research has shown that an organization's employees' aggregate skills, knowledge, education, experience, and talents are resources (Penrose, 1959; Wernerfelt, 1984). Barney (1991, 1995) argued that an organization could leverage employees' talents, skills, knowledge, experience, and other characteristics as a resource to obtain a sustainable competitive advantage. Ployhart and Moliterno (2011) noted that while the human capital construct was studied in various fields of study, there lacks a multi-level model that describes how the human capital resource is transformed across the firm.

Ployhart and Moliterno (2011) proposed a theoretical model that links a person's skills, knowledge, abilities, talents, and other characteristics at the individual and organizational levels by analyzing human resource capital at the unit level. The proposed model explained how human capital resources are created on a multilevel model (Ployhart & Moliterno, 2011). Ployhart and Moliterno (2011) defined human capital as "a unit-level resource that is created from the emergence of individuals' knowledge, skills, abilities, and other characteristics (KSAOs)" (p.

128). The process of emergence is the central idea of this definition provided by Ployhart and Moliterno (2011). The Ployhart and Moliterno (2011) model proposes a multilevel human capital resource emergence process where individual KSAOs are converted into valuable resources at the unit-level. The model (see Figure 2) explains how lower-level KSAOs at the individual level are used to create the emergence of human capital resources (Ployhart & Moliterno, 2011)

Figure 2

The Multilevel Model of Human Capital Emergence



Note: This figure is the proposed model of the Multilevel model of Human Capital Resource Emergence that explains the individual-level and until-level KSAOs. Reprinted from “Emergence of the human capital resource: A multilevel model” R. Ployhart and T. Moliterno, 2011, *Academy of Management Review* 36(1), 132.

At the micro and macro levels, the human capital resource is a single-level analysis that does not consider the link between the two (Ployhart & Moliterno,

2011). The individual-level KSAOs are connected to individual outcomes, which are considered in organizational performance (Wright et al., 2001). The KSAOs considered at the individual level focus on cognitive ability and personality (Ployhart & Moliterno, 2011). The application of KSAOs at the organizational level focus on the aggregate KSOAs at the unit level and their ability to create a sustainable competitive advantage (Wright et al., 1994). The Ployhart and Moliterno (2011) model proposes that human capital resources are not necessarily resources that an organization possesses, but it is the process through which human capital resources are created from individual KSAOs. The model does not assume that the relationship between the individual and organizational level can be generalized from one level to the other but that there is a cross-level relationship. The cross-level relationship exists through the human capital resource created by the lower-level KSAOs (Ployhart & Moliterno, 2011).

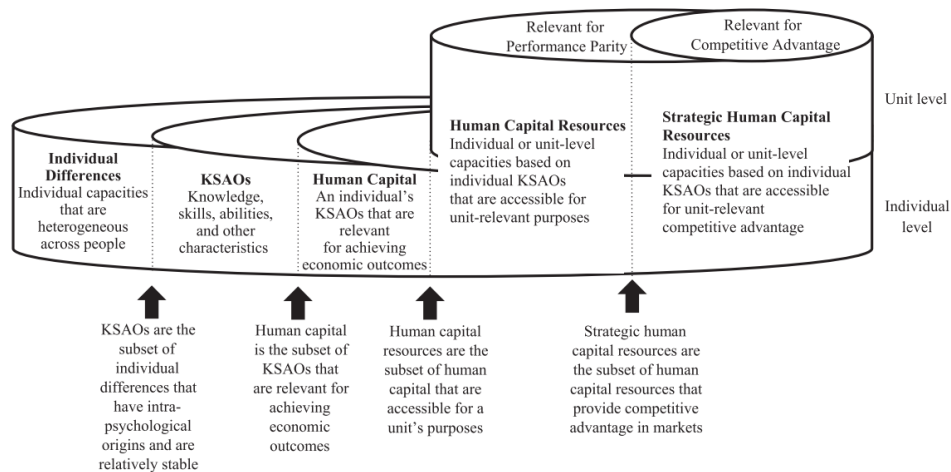
As seen in Figure 2, Human Capital Construct Distinctions, the KSAOs at the individual level include cognitive and noncognitive characteristics. The cognitive characteristics are what a person “can do” (Ployhart & Moliterno, 2011). General cognitive abilities refer to an individual’s mental ability and intelligence, such as comprehension and information creation (Jensen, 1998). Ployhart and Moliterno (2011) described skills as “the capacity to learn more information or learn information more quickly (e.g., study skills, reading skills)” (p 134). Cognitive skills are learned through education or experiences, including problem-solving and social interactions (Ployhart & Moliterno, 2011). Cognitive

experiences are shown in the ability to transfer the knowledge gained to the job and firm-specific knowledge (Ployhart & Moliterno, 2011). In contrast to cognitive KSAOs, noncognitive KSAOs are a person's "will do," including personality and interests (Ployhart & Moliterno, 2011). Ployhart and Moliterno (2011) utilized McCrae and Costa (1996) to define personality as five factors: emotional stability, extraversion, openness to experience, agreeableness, and conscientiousness. The individual KSAOs, including cognitive and noncognitive, are combined and amplified through groups' and teams' work processes as they complete tasks within the organizational environment (Ployhart & Moliterno, 2011). During this analysis phase, the team members bring their individual KSAOs to the unit's task environment, where tasks are to be completed, allowing the human capital resource to emerge (Ployhart & Moliterno, 2011).

Ployhart et al. (2014) clarify the model presented in Ployhart and Moliterno (2011) and offer further explanation and discussion of the human capital construct. Ployhart et al. (2014) recognize the shortcomings of past research, including that of Ployhart and Moliterno (2011), in that human capital resources need to be redefined. Ployhart et al. (2014) noted that a clear distinction is needed between KSAOs, human capital, human capital resources, and strategic capital resources in order to understand the relationship. Ployhart et al. (2014) presented Figure 4, which outlines the distinction between individual differences, KSAOs, human capital, human capital resources, and strategic capital resources.

Figure 3

Human Capital Construct Distinctions



Note: Each construct to the right is a subset of the construct to the left. The arrows define the boundaries between each subset. Text within the figure refers to each construct's definition.

Note: This outlines the distinction between Individual Differences, KSAOs, Human Capital, Human Capital Resources, and Strategic Human Capital Resources. Reprinted from "Human capital is dead, long live human capital resources" R. Ployhart, A. Nyerg, and G. Reilly, 2014, *Journal of Management* 40(2), 376 with permission from SAGE PUBLISHING

Where Ployhart and Moliterno (2011) addressed KSAOs from an individual perspective, they did not discuss that all individual differences are not KSAOs. According to Ployhart et al. (2014), all humans possess individual differences, including capabilities. However, these differences are not necessarily always KSAOs. Like Ployhart and Moliterno (2011), Ployhart et al. (2014) explain that individual differences include cognitive and noncognitive constructs; however, not all are KSAOs because they can be more variable and based on situations. The researcher explained that KSAOs are more stable and consistent regardless of situation or time frame (Ployhart et al., 2014). To define KSAOs, Ployhart et al.

(2014) utilized (Noe et al., 2006) to define KSAOs. Noe et al. (2006) defined knowledge as information that an individual needs in order to complete a task, skills as an individual's capacity to perform specific tasks, ability as an individual's capabilities that applies to various job tasks, and other capabilities as personality traits that influence a broad range of job tasks. Noe et al. (2006) explained that while people learn skills through formal education, experience can improve them.

Ployhart et al. (2014) point out that individuals' KSAOs are not all considered human capital but only those relevant to achieving economic outcomes. The Ployhart et al. (2014) study does not debate that an individual's KSAOs are valuable to the economy and society. Ployhart et al. (2014) contended that for an individual's KSAOs to be considered human capital, they must have an economic effect. Becker (1964) explained the difference between an economic effect and cultural value. Ployhart et al. (2014) pointed out that human capital achieves an economic effect; therefore, it is a subset of an individual's KSAOs. Human capital resources and human capital are used interchangeably; however, there are distinct differences. Prior research suggested that human capital resources exist at the unit level, and human capital is at the individual level (Nyberg et al., 2014). The arguments presented by Nyberg et al. (2014) are problematic, where literature has found that top management teams possess individual differences and KSAOs that differentiate an organization's performance. However, Ployhart et al. (2014) used the micro-foundations perspective (Felin et al., 2012) to point out that human capital resources do not only exist at the unit level but can also exist at the

individual level. Felin et al. (2012) emphasized that individual and collective human capital resources are inseparable and equally important. Using the micro-foundations perspective of Felin et al. (2012) for analysis, the human resources capital framework suggests that human capital resources simultaneously consist of unit-level and individual capacities. The focus of human capital resources is the capacities for producing outcomes and not KSAOs (Ployhart et al., 2014). The human capital resources must be accessible at the unit level to produce outcomes at this level, meaning the unit must be able to use the capacity (Ployhart et al., 2014). The human capital resource framework proposed by Ployhart et al. (2014) consists of different human capital resources because humans possess many KSAOs, whereas individual KSAOs are the micro-foundations of human capital resources. Therefore, at the unit level, there are different types of human capital resources produced from individual capacities combined with unit-level capacities (Ployhart et al., 2014). There are four implications of the human capital resource framework (Ployhart et al., 2014). First, an individual's KSAOs are considered human capital resources if they are accessible and relevant to producing unit-level outcomes. Second, although human capital resources begin at individual KSAOs, they can exist at multiple levels. Third, individuals contain cognitive and noncognitive KSAOs. Fourth, various human capital resources exist at the individual, unit, and collective levels.

The human capital theory provides a theoretical framework for analyzing the need for African American women in corporate leadership roles and the

importance of their acquisition of soft skills. Becker (2002) purported that human capital can only be found in individuals. The human capital theory is based on the premise that human capital investments positively impact the individual, organization, and economy (Becker, 1964, 2002). Human resource management and development have become a part of an organization's strategy for growth and sustainability (Wright et al., 2005; Wright et al., 1994). Ployhart and Moliterno (2011) and Ployhart et al. (2014) provide a framework to evaluate the role of individual differences, KSAOs, human capital, and human capital resources. According to Ployhart et al. (2014), individuals possess differences in abilities, skills, and talents that become KSAOs when they can add value to an organization, thus creating human capital. African American women bring their unique individual differences into an organization. African American women have gained knowledge, skills, and abilities from their lived experiences (Byrd, 2009; DeLany & Rogers, 2004; Parker & Ogilvie, 1996; Sims & Carter, 2019). Davis (2016) identified skills in African American women leaders that align with the top ten leadership soft skills (Kalman, 2012). Davis (2016) stated that African American women in leadership demonstrate emotional intelligence, agility, resilience, and authenticity. The disparity of African American women in leadership roles means that organizations limit the human capital they can bring to the organization. Creating diversity in leadership enhances human capital of an organization through the ability to attract and retain a diverse group of differences and KSAOs (Aldulaimi, 2018).

Human Capital and African American Women

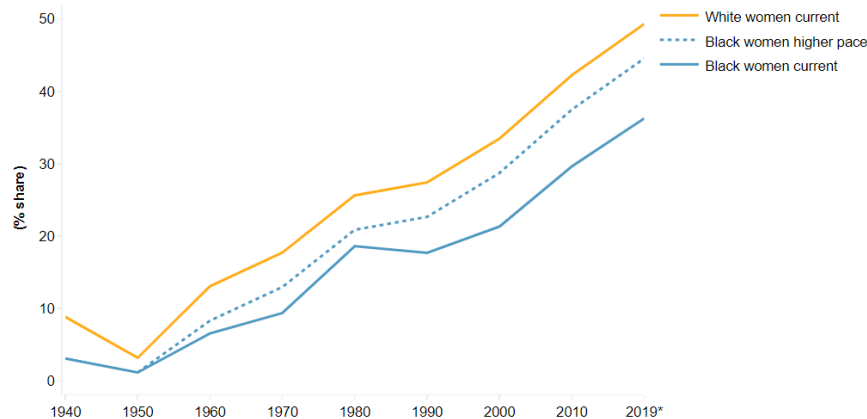
Becker (1994) used human capital investment to analyze the changes in women's education in the United States. Becker (1994) found that changes in women's education demonstrate that human capital investments tend to respond sensibly to cost-benefit analysis. The trend of growing job opportunities improved as women invested in human capital (Becker, 1994). The trend grew sharply in the late 1970s when women became more prominent in highly skilled jobs (Becker, 1994). With the number of job opportunities, women recognized the value of market skills and entered into subjects that paid well (Becker, 1994). The growth of women's earnings as they invested in human capital also impacted the economic position of black women (Becker, 1994).

Although the economic growth of women's earnings did impact the economic position of black women, recent studies have shown that the white-black wage gap for female professionals in 2019 was \$12,700, which translates to a loss in economic growth (Bovino & Zafar, 2021). Bovino and Zafar (2021) further argue that if black women attained education at the same rate as white women from 1960 to 2019, the U.S. economy would have generated an additional \$107 billion. Though Becker (1994) argues that the impact of human capital investment of women through education increased the earnings of white women, impacting the position of black women, since 1980, the college gap has widened for black women shown in Figure 4.

Figure 4

The College Wage Gap for Black Women

Closing The College Gap For Black Women



Note: This figure depicts the college gap for black women from 1940 to 2018. Reprinted from “How the advancement of black women will build a better economy for all” by B. Bovino and R. Zafar, 2021, *S&P Global*.

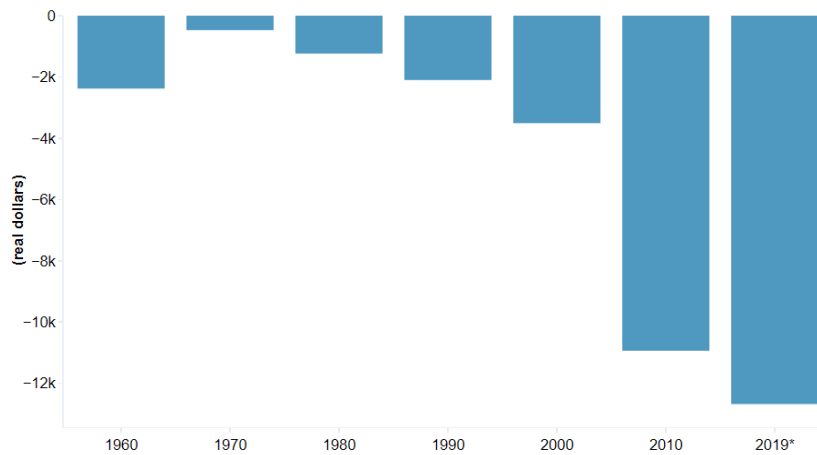
Becker (1994) accurately stated that there was an increase in human capital investment through education attainment by women; however, literature shows that African American women did not experience the same economic or career benefits as white women (Catalyst, 2009; Combs, 2003; Davidson & Davidson, 1997; Key et al., 2012). Figure 4 shows that African American women have increasingly invested in their human capital by attaining a college degree. Based on the human capital theory (Becker, 1993, 2002), individuals will benefit from an investment in human capital; however, this has not necessarily remained true at the same rate for African American women. After the growth period discussed by Becker (1993), around the 1980s, the family income wealth gap widened by race to \$26,500, which Bovino and Zafar (2021) presented using data from the Pew Research Center

(Kochhar & Cilluffo, 2018). Bovino and Zafar (2021) analyzed data from the Integrated Public Use Microdata Series (IPUMS) and found that despite the gap wage narrowing in 1980, it widened more by 2019 to \$5,300. They further found that the wage gap between white and black professional women widened to \$12,700, as shown in Figure 5 (Bovino & Zafar, 2021).

Figure 5

Wage Gap Between Black White Women Professionals

Wage Gap Between Black And White Women Professionals



*Latest available data. Note: "Wages" include total pre-tax wage and salary income for the previous year. It includes wages, salaries, commissions, cash bonuses, tips, and other money received from an employer. Sources: IPUMS, Census ACS, and S&P Global calculations.

Note: This chart depicts the wage gap between white and black professional women from 1940 to 2018. Reprinted from "How the advancement of black women will build a better economy for all" by B. Bovino and R. Zafar, 2021, *S&P Global*. Used with Permission from S&P Global Ratings.

Becker (1994) generalized the white women's experience in the workforce as they gained human capital through investment in education; however, it is evident that African American women did not experience these same gains. Where African American women increased their human capital investment by attaining education, which Becker (1993, 1994) uses as a measure, they did not obtain

professional positions at the same rate as their white counterparts. Bovino and Zafar (2021), using data from IPUMS and American Community Survey Data from the Census Bureau (ACS), found that Black women are left behind. Black and white college-educated women made strides in obtaining more profitable jobs in the professional section; however, the gains experienced by white women were 31% versus 23% of black women (Bovino & Zafar, 2021). The results found by Bovino and Zafar (2021) echo those of past researchers. Bovino and Zafar (2021) aligned with Pompper (2011), who found that African American women are overlooked as managers and decision-makers. Harnois (2010) found that historically the dual minority status of African American women continues to hold them to positions at the bottom.

Parker (2005) explained that the cause of this disparity is the tradition of stereotypes, preconceptions, and discrimination. The human capital theory applies in theory; however, other historical and deeply rooted factors may impact their ability to gain higher earnings through human capital investment when applied to African American women. However, organizational performance implications exist when African American women are considered human capital stock. Using Ployhart et al. (2014), African American women bring individual differences into an organization that includes their KSAOs. Parker and Ogilvie (1996) propose that African American women demonstrate unique skills, including leadership skills, adaptive skills, creativity, and innovation. Parker and Ogilvie (1996) explain that these skills are unique because African American women gain these skills and

abilities through their experiences while navigating their careers. These unique skills, coupled with the African American woman's human capital investment in education, add value to the organization, which is frequently omitted from the organization. According to the human capital theory (Becker, 1964), African American women's leadership disparity should be resolved through education investment. However, due to other barriers, human capital investment for African American women is insufficient (Bovino & Zafar, 2021). In order to navigate these barriers, research has shown that African American women must increase their social and human capital (Hewlett et al., 2012; Johns, 2013; Sales et al., 2020). Social capital does not impact the organization's performance, yet when supported by human capital, there is a positive impact on organizational performance. Based on the literature, an investment in social and human capital will help African American women navigate barriers as they ascend their careers (Bovino & Zafar, 2021). The attainment of soft skills adds to the African American woman's human capital (Becker, 1964), while it helps African American women increase their social capital through building relationships.

Human Capital and Soft Skills

The attainment of soft skills by African American women serves multiple purposes. It adds to the individual human capital of African American women (Becker, 1964). The increase in this human capital will allow African American women to add to economic growth (Effiok et al., 2012; Galor & Moav, 2004; Glaeser et al., 2004; J. Y. Kim, 2018; Olimpia, 2012). Additionally, attaining soft skills will allow them to serve as a human capital resource where the resource

serves as a capability that adds to the unit the level of performance, thus adding to the organizational performance (Ployhart et al., 2014). Ployhart et al. (2014) explained that individual KSAOs are considered human capital when they are relevant to achieving economic outcomes. They also explained that KSAOs at the individual level include cognitive and noncognitive characteristics. Soft skills and non-cognitive skills are often used interchangeably to refer to the same set of an individual's attributes (AbuJbara & Worley, 2018). Furthermore, soft and noncognitive skills are often called leadership competencies (Crosbie, 2005; Muir, 2004; Mumford et al., 2000).

Human capital investment is the crux of the human capital theory, which emphasizes human capital's individual, organizational, and economic benefits (Becker, 1964, 1994, 2002). Kiel (2016) explained that organizations consider human capital, soft skills, and 21st-century skills as essential for employee development to succeed financially. According to Kim (2018), cognitive abilities or hard skills are not the only attributes of human capital that benefit the organization. Kim (2018) supports Ployhart and Moliterno (2011) in that cognitive and non-cognitive skills complement one another. Kim (2018) found that the attainment of socioemotional skills, which are also non-cognitive skills, experience the same economic outcomes as the cognitive skills, where they work together to benefit the firm. Enhancing the soft skills of individuals adds to the KSAOs, thus enhancing human and organizational capital (Aldulaimi, 2018). Ployhart and Moliterno (2011) suggested that human capital resources can be cognitive or non-

cognitive. Humans possess individual differences that include capacities such as non-cognitive skills or abilities Ployhart et al. (2014) clarified that an individual's KSAOs, including non-cognitive skills or abilities, are only human capital when they are relevant to achieving an economic outcome. Ployhart et al. (2014) further clarified that human capital is only human resources when accessible at the unit level and able to produce outcomes at this level. Using Ployhart et al. (2014), soft skills are only considered human capital if they produce at the organizational level and overall outcomes. Studies have shown that soft skills improve individual performance within organizations, including individual work at the unit level (Lahope et al., 2020; Seetha, 2014). Additionally, studies have shown that developing soft skills within an organization impacts performance (Dharmarajan et al., 2012; Rao, 2015; Sarker et al., 2019; Tang, 2020) Dharmarajan et al. (2012). Therefore, based on Ployhart and Moliterno (2011) and Ployhart et al. (2014), soft skills are non-cognitive KSOAs that can be considered human capital and human capital resources.

Soft Skills

Soft skills is a trendy term that is ambiguous, yet authors use this term extensively (Matteson et al., 2017). Matteson et al. (2017) posited that soft skills are a term searching for meaning. Many have used different variations of the term; therefore, not one universal meaning has been defined (Chamorro-Premuzic et al., 2010). Researchers have not agreed on one meaning of the term; hence, exploring and defining soft skills is necessary to evaluate their benefits further. Based on research and the variations of the term, it is possible to create a general definition of

soft skills. Some researchers have provided a broad definition of soft skills, while others have provided a specific list of soft skills, which may be too restrictive. Researchers also have different views on whether soft skills are innate or can be learned. Wheeler (2016) stated that soft skills are innate, and some are fortunate to inherit these skills. Ibrahim et al. (2017) agree with Wheeler (2016) that soft skills are innate. Beutell et al. (2021) agree with Wheeler (2016) and Ibrahim et al. (2017) and found that while soft skills are innate, one can learn them from different life experiences. Beutell et al. (2021) support (Katz, 1974) in that people can develop any skill needed to be an effective performer. Hyder et al. (2020) found that many soft skills are innate; however, they are not all innate and can be learned over time. Hyder et al. (2020) further explain that while challenging to learn, it is possible. Based on the varying definitions and explanations of the origin of soft skills, it is necessary to explore the various views of definitions of soft skills.

Robles (2012) surveyed 90 business executives to determine the critical soft skills employers want from their employees. The researcher defined soft skills as a combination of interpersonal skills and personal attributes (Robles, 2012). The Robles (2012) study also found that business executives consider soft skills an essential employee attribute. Participants in this study were business executives who identified the top soft skills (Robles, 2012). The top 10 soft skills were “integrity, communication, courtesy, responsibility, social skills, positive attitude, professionalism, flexibility, teamwork, and work ethic” (Robles, 2012, p. 456).

Hurrell et al. (2013) provided a broad definition by stating that soft skills are non-technical, not reliant on abstract reasoning, and involve interpersonal and intrapersonal abilities to facilitate performance. This definition is broad enough to include many attributes and skills. Other researchers, such as Grugulis and Vincent (2009), provide a more specific list of skills when defining soft skills. These two researchers provided a list that included “communication, problem-solving, team-working, an ability to improve personal learning and performance, motivation, judgment, leadership, and initiative” (Grugulis & Vincent, 2009). This list includes many skills employers have identified as needed in employees; however, it does not align with the definition provided by Hurrell et al. (2013). This list of skills does include skills that require abstract reasoning, which is the ability to analyze information, detect patterns and relationships, and solve problems. Problem-solving, judgment, leadership, initiative, and problem-solving all require reasoning. The difference in definitions shows no universal definition of soft skills. Cimatti (2016) provided another broad definition of soft skills and divided the skills into two categories: interpersonal and intrapersonal. The distinction is made here based on what the person must understand and develop by himself, while the second category gathers what the person can develop relating to other people (Cimatti, 2016). This definition is also broad enough to categorize specific skill sets under broad categories.

Regarding the definition of soft skills, others have included management skills, communication, conflict resolution, and teamwork, which are definite

attributes of job performance (Matteson et al., 2017). Researchers use these terms interchangeably when determining what skills are necessary to perform in the workplace effectively. Previous research grouped these attributes under the broad categories Cimatti (2016) and Hurrell et al. (2013) mentioned. Kim et al. (2011) provided an expansive definition where they identified three categories:

- “interpersonal skills, such as teamwork skills and customer service skills;
- thinking skills, such as decision-making and knowing how to learn; and
- personal skills, such as sociability and self-management” (Kim et al., 2011, p. 752)

The U.S. Department of Labor (1991) developed these categories. This definition also aligns with Cimatti (2016) as it identifies interpersonal and intrapersonal skills. While using these two definitions, one can determine that interpersonal and intrapersonal skills are essential categories of soft skills. While considering the various definitions of soft skills and the two broad categories, it is logical to use the broad categories provided by Kim et al. (2011) using the U.S. Department of Labor list (1991, pp. 5-6), which includes intrapersonal and interpersonal skills (see Figure 2). The three categories and the skills identified by the U.S. Department of Labor (1991) provide a clear and reasonable definition of soft skills. The critical aspect of this list is that it is not exhaustive. As stated, the list is not limited to these categories and specific skills (see Figure 2) (Kim et al., 2011).

Figure 6

Soft Skills Categories and Definitions

Personal Quality	
Responsibility	Exerts a high level of effort and perseveres towards goal attainment.
Self-Esteem	Believes in own self-worth and maintains a positive view of self.
Self-Management	Assesses self accurately, sets personal goals, monitors progress, and exhibits self-control.
Integrity/Honesty	Chooses ethical courses of action.
Thinking Skills	
Creative Thinking	Generates new ideas, combines information in new ways.
Decision Making	Specifies goals and constraints, generates alternatives, considers risks, and evaluates and chooses best alternative.
Problem Solving	Recognizes problems, devises and implements plan of action.
Knowing How to Learn	Uses efficient learning techniques to acquire and apply new knowledge and skills.
Reasoning	Discovers a rule or principle underlying the relationship between two or more objects and applies it when solving a problem.
Interpersonal Skills	
Participates as a member of a Team	Contributes to group with ideas, suggestions, and effort.
Teaches Others	Helps others learn.
Serves Customers	Works and communicates with customers to satisfy their expectations.
Exercises Leadership	Communicates ideas to justify position, persuades and convinces others.
Negotiates	Works toward agreements that involve exchanging resources or resolving divergent interests.
Works with Diversity	Works well with men and women from diverse backgrounds.

Note. This figure was created using the definitions and categories provided by “Training soft skills via e-learning: International chain hotels,” by J. Kim, M. Erdem, J. Bynum, and H. Jeong, 2011 *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management*, 23(6), 739-763.

Touloumakos (2020) agreed with Matteson et al. (2017) that soft skills is a term in search of a definition. Touloumakos (2020) argued that soft skills are a term that is continuously expanding, which leaves the term without a restrictive definition but includes a variety of qualities, traits, values, and attributes. Touloumakos (2020) further argued that the purpose of the term is to distinguish

between technical and cognitive skills. The meaning of soft skills has expanded to include different traits, qualities, attributes, and values (Touloumakos, 2020). Touloumakos (2020) argued that the soft skills definition includes infinite categories that could continue to expand, because the only real distinction is between those skills that were cognitive versus technical. Touloumakos (2020) reviewed historical literature from Haines (1972), Caudron (1999), Moss and Tilly (2001), Robles (2012), Cimatti (2016), and many more scholars to compile a robust list of soft skills based on the literature review performed in the study (see Figure 3). The list Touloumakos (2020) developed is plausible as it affirms the definitions presented in this literature review.

Figure 7

List of Soft Skills

Qualities: Adaptability, Flexibility, Responsibility, Courtesy, Integrity, Professionalism, Effectiveness
Values: Trustworthiness and Work Ethic
Volitions, Predispositions, Attitudes, Willingness to Learn, Learning to learn other skills, Hardworking, Working Under Pressure, Uncertainty
Problem-solving, Decision-making, Analytical/Thinking Skills, Creativity/Innovation, Manipulation of Knowledge, Critical Judgment
Leadership skills and Managing Skills
Interpersonal Savvy/Skills, Team Skills, Effective and Productive Interpersonal Interactions
Communication skills, Negotiation, Conflict Resolution, Persuasion Skills, Diversity
Emotional Labor
Aesthetics, Professional Appearance
Cognitive ability and Processes

Note. This figure was created based on the list of soft skills provided from “Expanded Yet Restricted: A Mini-Review of the Soft Skills Literature,” by A. Touloumakos, 2020, *Frontiers in Psychology*, 11.

It is pertinent to distinguish between soft and hard skills. Many believe that soft skills complement hard skills, with hard skills as the more important attribute.

Hard skills are more of the technical aspects of performing the job, which entails acquired knowledge (Page et al., 1993). These skills include technical abilities, factual knowledge, and specialized talents that someone can develop through work experience, study, or practice (Wheeler, 2016). Based on these definitions, it is reasonable to believe that hard skills require cognitive reasoning and that an individual's Intellectual Quotient influence them (IQ; Rainsbury et al., 2002).

On the contrary, interpersonal, human, people, and behavior skills are considered soft skills. These attributes focus more on personal behavior and relationships between people. Soft skills are mainly affective or behavioral; thus, associated with the Emotional Quotient (EQ; Rainsbury et al., 2002). "EQ is regarded as a blend of innate characteristics and human/personal/interpersonal skills" (Kemper, 1999, p.16). Thus, the difference between soft and hard skills is that hard skills focus on the intellectual quotient, while soft skills focus on the emotional quotient.

As it relates to assessing hard skills versus soft skills, it is easier to observe, quantify, and measure hard skills than soft skills. Hard skills are easier to train, acquire, and deal with because the skill set is not brand new and does not involve any behavioral attributes, as with soft skills (Ibrahim et al., 2017). Hard skills are assessed according to job-specific abilities and are tangible, while soft skills are more difficult to assess because there is no direct link to a job task, and they are intangible (Cimatti, 2016). Soft skills pose more of a challenge for organizations, so it is common for organizations to neglect the development of soft skills. Spencer

and Spencer (1993) denoted that technical skills and knowledge, which are hard skills, represent the minimum level of skills necessary to perform a job with basic competence. Therefore, hard skills are not enough to excel beyond a basic level of job performance. Many authors regard hard and soft skills as complementary, where one must possess hard and soft skills for success in the workplace, and superior performers have high IQ and EQ ratings (Kemper, 1999).

Furthermore, research by Spencer and Spencer (1993) showed that high performers are not distinguished only by the ability to perform hard skills but those who manifest good soft and hard skills. Spencer and Spencer (1993) strongly suggest that soft skills are more than a complement to hard skills but are essential to career success and workplace performance. As stated by Wheeler (2016), “soft skills are the skills that allow you to use your technical abilities and knowledge effectively in the workplace” (p.29). In the last few years, there has been a shift in the belief that soft skills complement hard skills. Employers recognize the importance of soft skills as they claim to require, marginalizing technical skills and privileging soft skills (Grugulis & Vincent, 2009). Several surveys conducted in American businesses recently asked employers about the skills they want to see in their employees (Buhler, 2001). Their responses were consistent in that they wanted to see soft skills such as communication skills, interpersonal skills, team player skills, ethics, creativity, an ability to value diversity, responsiveness, and a willingness to change (Buhler, 2001).

Leadership Soft Skills

Soft skills have emerged as a new area of leadership, both now and in the future, and they are a focus for high performance since they are seen as a crucial and vital component in any organization's success (Sadq, 2019). Research has found a positive relationship between an employee's possession of soft skills and an organization's performance (Lahope et al., 2020; Seetha, 2014). Sadq (2019) identified communication, initiative, training, and team-building skills as leadership soft skills. The theoretical framework presented in the Sadq (2019) study proposes that leadership soft skills significantly impact followers' behavior toward discipline, commitment, and belonging to their work organization. Due to the inconsistencies and lack of a comprehensive definition of soft skills, corporate leaders have misconceptions about them (Aldulaimi, 2018). To clarify the misconceptions that leaders have about soft skills, Aldulaimi (2018) explained that soft skills that are important to leaders including "social power, trust, mentoring and coaching, succession preparation, supporting, intelligence, emotional intelligence, inspirational and cultural and diversity awareness" (p. 1). Historically, management and leadership skills focused on crucial technical skills in performing job tasks (Aldulaimi, 2018). Research has found that employees need leaders with soft skills that can be more general toward effective organizational performance across job functions (Aldulaimi, 2018).

Ariratana et al.(2015), in their study of the development of leadership soft skills, created a list utilizing Crosbie (2005), Somerset (2001), and Tang (2012) of leadership soft skills, including "communication and presentation; leadership

competency; teamwork; analytical thinking and creative problem solving; professional and morality; learning; usage of information technology; and development of interpersonal relationship” (p. 333). The definitions of soft skills and leadership soft skills continue to expand. This study aims to explore the role of soft skills in African American women’s ability to ascend to corporate leadership; therefore, the soft skills referred to in this study are leadership soft skills. The Center for Creative Leadership (CCL) highlighted the top ten leadership soft skills most applicable to this study (Kalman, 2012). Figure 6, created by Kalman (2012 pp. 1-2), aligns with previous definitions of soft skills and leadership soft skills; however, the researcher narrowed the list for this study. The list of soft skills provided by the Center for Creative leadership aligns with many definitions of soft skills developed by various studies (Cimatti, 2016; Grugulis & Vincent, 2009; Hurrell et al., 2013; J. Kim et al., 2011; Robles, 2012; Touloumakos, 2020). Additionally, Cockerill et al.(1995) studied the essential behavior competencies in high-performing managers, and the list is consistent with Kalman (2012). Cockerill et al. (1995) list included “concept formation, conceptual flexibility, interpersonal search, managing interaction, development orientation, impact, self-confidence, presentation, proactive orientation, achievement orientation, and information search.” (pp. 2-3). The terms used throughout the literature to define soft skills support and align with the list created by the Center for Creative leadership; therefore, this study will use this list as a comprehensive list to study its role in the African American woman’s corporate journey.

Figure 8

Top 10 Leadership Soft Skills

Soft Skill	Explanation provided by the Center for Creative Leadership
Self-awareness:	Leaders must have an accurate picture of their strengths and weaknesses.
Learning agility:	This is an individual's readiness, willingness and ability to learn from experience.
Emotional intelligence:	A constellation of abilities that help leaders deal with their emotions and the emotions of others.
Resiliency:	Bouncing back from adversity
Building relationships at all levels:	Being able to show compassion, sensitivity and have a sense of humor with others – above and below in organizational structure – and being able to cultivate these relationships toward positive business performance.
Political savvy:	The ability to influence people to obtain goals. The heart of being politically savvy is networking, reading situations and thinking before speaking. Not every leader likes politics but it's present in every organization.
Motivating and engaging others:	How many leaders have been successful when they cannot motivate their teams?
Building and leading effective teams:	Building trust, setting strategic direction and breaking down silos are some of the micro skills need.
Creating a culture of trust and respect:	This has become a big challenge since the rise of virtual communication, yet trust and respect among team members – chiefly among leaders – is paramount
Communication:	Voicing goals and inspiring others is vital – but so is listening

Note. This figure was created from the list of top 10 leadership soft skills provided from “Top 10 top leadership soft skills,” by F. Kalman, 2012, Chief Learning Officer.

Benefits of the Acquisition of Soft Skills

Majid et al. (2012) and Rao (2015) found that soft skills help improve an individual's career. Majid et al. (2012) studied the importance of soft skills in employment and career development by analyzing the results of a quantitative study of students. Majid et al. (2012) found that valuable soft skills included

problem-solving, communication, and leadership. The author further determined that the right makeup of soft skills plays a significant role in an individual's successful career (Majid et al., 2012). Additionally, soft skills help with the social interactions of individuals (Majid et al., 2012). Rao (2015) prepared a soft skills training model based on the literature and explained that soft skills help candidates obtain a job. The researcher further explained that soft skills also help individuals become influential in the workplace with the ability to lead others (Rao, 2015).

Researchers have also tied the organization's performance to their employees' possession of soft skills (Lahope et al., 2020; Seetha, 2014). Seetha (2014) studied the importance of soft skills in the workplace and performed a study to determine the most critical skills within the workplace. Through a qualitative study using managers and executives as participants, the researcher identified teamwork, positive attitude, social and interpersonal, analytical and problem-solving, leadership, and communication as the critical soft skills needed in the workplace (Seetha, 2014). These skills are crucial to an organization's performance and necessary for individuals' employability (Seetha, 2014). Lahope et al. (2020) explored the relationship between soft skills training and company performance. Their qualitative study found that soft skills training supported the company's performance. They found that soft skills training contributed to the employee's productivity and effectiveness, which benefits the organization (Lahope et al., 2020). According to Lahope et al. (2020), one benefit of an employee's soft skills is creative thinking to implement creative solutions for company strategies. Lahope et

al. (2020) argued that creative employees drive innovation, increasing a company's performance. Lahope et al. (2020) added that soft skills enable employees to work optimally while fostering dedication and loyalty to the organization.

Additionally, Sarker et al. (2019) performed a quantitative study to determine the relationship between soft skills and job performance. Their study found that soft skills and job performance have a positive relationship (Sarker et al., 2019). Sarker et al. (2019) also found that soft skills are vital for a person's professional career. They found that soft skills contribute to an individual's professional career (Sarker et al., 2019). Sarker et al. (2019) agreed with Dharmarajan et al. (2012), where the latter team found that soft skills are required to succeed in a professional career. Dharmarajan et al. (2012), in their study of the impact of soft skills on students, found that soft skills contribute to an individual's social competence. Dharmarajan et al. (2012) found that soft skills should accompany hard skills for students to experience success in their careers. Sarker et al. (2019) explained further how soft skills play a role in the development of social skills as well as professional competency. Tang (2020) performed a mixed-methods study to determine the significance of soft skills in teaching methods. Through interviews, questionnaires, and analysis, Tang (2020) deduced that soft skills help strengthen the competency of employees by fostering ethics, morals, and professional skills. Sarker et al. (2019) and Tang (2020) argued that soft skills enable people to manage their job effectively and navigate challenges while taking advantage of opportunities.

Before Sarker et al. (2019) and Tang (2020) found that soft skills benefit a company's performance as well as add value to an individual's career, Wesley et al. (2017) studied soft skills from a different angle and looked at the perceptions of soft skills by faculty, students, and industry leaders. The study showed that each group perceived the importance of soft skills in a different order of hierarchy, which is essential to understand when training students (Wesley et al., 2017). The author argued that soft skills make students successful within their business organizations because it enhances their ability to work with a team and motivate employees to achieve the goals of an organization (Wesley et al., 2017). This study concluded that soft skills complement an individual's hard skills to allow them to utilize their technical skills to their full advantage, and soft skills are necessary for employees to be more successful in the workplace (Wesley et al., 2017). More specifically, Islam et al. (2018) studied factors influencing women in leadership roles and determined that soft skills were significant. Islam et al. (2018) performed a qualitative study interviewing eight women to determine their obstacles in leadership roles. Islam et al. (2018) found that, as the work environment has become more challenging and competitive, soft skills help individuals become more effective leaders and managers. Islam et al. (2018) agreed with Wesley et al. (2017), Sarker et al. (2019), and Tang (2020) that soft skills benefit both the individual and the organization.

Diversity in the workplace

Diversity is a phenomenon that individuals view from different perspectives, but it should be understood that diversity in a holistic view is more

than gender and race (Areiqat et al., 2020). Areqat et al. (2020) defined diversity as gender, nationality, race, sexual orientation, age, physical or mental capacity, and characteristics. In their study, Areqat et al. (2020) recognized diversity as two-dimensional. The dimensions include self-image and principal views as the first dimension (Areiqat et al., 2020). The second dimension is more complex and considers education, geography, language, family status, workload, experience, and income (Areiqat et al., 2020). Davis (2018) used the analogy of the iceberg model to define diversity. Davis (2018) explained that there are visible traits, including gender, race, age, skill, color, and physical attributes. In addition to the visible traits are traits that are not visible and fall below the waterline, such as education, family status, place of birth, economic status, religion, skills, thoughts, and perspectives (Davis, 2018)

Over the years, as the understanding of diversity grows, minorities and women have made strides to solidify their place in the workforce (Holder et al., 2015). Hewlett et al. (2012) found that minorities have progressed in the workforce since the civil rights movement, where segregation and discrimination were made illegal. Hewlett et al. (2012) defined this growth as an “era of vibrant diversity” (p. 1). In their discussion of the feminization framework, Taylor and Kennedy (2003) described the increase of women within the workforce as feminizing the workforce.

Today, many organizations are undergoing a corporate cultural shift to begin fostering a culture of diversity and inclusion. After research has shown organizations the benefits of diversity, the appreciation for diversity has grown

among organizations (Hewlett et al., 2012). Esty et al. (1995) explained diversity as more than understanding the differences among individuals, such as age, class, race, ethnicity, and disabilities. Diversity recognizes differences while acknowledging and valuing those differences (Esty et al., 1995). The benefits stretch far beyond what any organization may have considered. Diversity and inclusion allow organizations to benefit from the different perspectives of their employees. This allows organizations to address business decisions through varied lenses; therefore, the organizations can benefit from the individual abilities, skills, attributes, and experiences of those who make up the organization. This benefit can lead to organizational success (Krishnan, 2020). Diversity benefits all stakeholders within an organization. It is beneficial financially and to the organization to have diversity from lower-level staff to upper-level management (Krishnan, 2020). An increasing understanding of the benefits and need for diversity has steadily caused the workforce's face to evolve (Sue et al., 1998). Due to the increased attention to diversity matters and the broadening of workers within organizations, diversity within an organization can increase its performance through the increased productivity of its employees (Krishnan, 2020).

Though research has shown that diversity is more than gender and race, Krishnan (2020) indicated that if organizations do not recognize gender-related issues as a measure of diversity in the workplace, their efforts to become more diverse will be ineffective. This shows that gender is a critical part of diversification as the face of the workforce changes. Researchers have long

recognized the changing face of the United States workforce to become less of the traditional young white male and more diversified in gender and race (Sue et al., 1998). Even though researchers foresaw the United States workforce's changes, diversification remains an issue that organizations aim to tackle. Johnston (1987), through studies by the Hudson Institute, found that, in the years leading up to 2000, only 15% of the workforce would be white men.

Additionally, Morrison (1992) estimated that the labor force in the 21st century would be 42% white women, 13% non-white women, and 7% non-white men. The study provided data that urged organizations to consider the implications of the changing workforce demographics. Sue et al. (1998) noted that if organizations did not learn to manage diversity well, it might cause the organization's productivity to decline. Morrison (1992) emphasized that diversity is a challenge some face due to the limited labor pool. Sue et al. (1998) warned organizations that, unless the issue of diversity and lack of women in the labor pool is faced head on and addressed, it will continue to be a challenge or issue within the work force. This is evidenced by the number of women in leadership roles.

It was not until 1963 that the United States saw its first female CEO. Since 2000, there have only been 151 CEOs who were white women and people of color within Fortune 500 companies (Zweigenhaft, 2021). Currently, women comprise 46.8% of the workforce; however, only 8% of the Chief Executive Officers of S&P 500 companies (Catalyst, 2021). While women-run businesses have increased significantly, women only make up 1.2% of the S&P 500 CEOs (Dunn, 2021). It is

clear that the issue of gender and minority diversity, more specifically African American women diversity, continues to remain a challenge for organizations.

Diversity Benefits, Challenges and Solutions

Krishnan (2020) stated that diversity is a necessity of organizations; however, the key to diversification is managing a diversified workforce. For diversity to benefit the organization, it must be managed effectively to increase its performance (Krishnan, 2020). Due to the demographic changes within the workforce, Krishnan (2020) emphasized that organizations would be required to review their management strategies and develop new management approaches. Areiqat et al. (2020) described globalization as a factor that drives diversity and stated that, for an organization to be successful in a globalized economy, it must obtain true workplace diversity. Their study lists three main benefits of diversity: increased creativity, increased productivity, and a positive reputation.

The O'Reilly et al. (1998) study found a positive correlation between innovation and diversity. It found that more diversity within a team fostered more creativity and innovation (O'Reilly et al., 1998). Hewlett et al. (2013) studied the impact of two types of diversity on creativity and innovation, including inherent and acquired diversity. Inherent diversity includes traits an individual is born with, such as gender, ethnicity, and sexual orientation (Hewlett et al., 2013). Acquired diversity includes traits individuals gain through experience (Hewlett et al., 2013). In the Harvard Business Review study, Hewlett et al. (2013) examined the correlation between market outcomes and diversity in leadership. The study showed that organizations that possessed both acquired and inherent diversity

outperformed and out-innovated organizations that did not possess acquired and inherent diversity (Hewlett et al., 2013).

Areiqat et al. (2020) identified increased productivity as a benefit of organizational diversity. Areiqat et al. (2020) used the analogy of a football team encompassing only(?) quarterbacks and how the team would not work well without diversity. According to Areiqat et al. (2020), an organization's diversity works the same way to generate productivity. Additional research has shown that organizations experience increased productivity when the organization is diverse. McGrath et al. (1995) used a McKinsey and Company study to show that companies comprised of men and women in leadership positions have a higher operating margin and market capitalization than their competition. Black Enterprise (2001) emphasized that effective people management improves workplace productivity. They stressed that an organization could achieve increased productivity through effective people management by managing and valuing diversity. Therefore, managing and valuing diversity improves workplace diversity (Black Enterprise, 2001). Green et al. (2002) found that creating diverse teams brings high productivity to the organization. Green et al. (2002) further stated that when individual differences are respected, the workplace will benefit by creating a competitive advantage and increasing productivity.

Areiqat et al. (2020) stated that trustworthiness is vital to success. Areiqat et al. (2020) explained that diverse organizations are widely regarded and considered favorite places to work by employees. This type of reputation brings

value and a positive reputation to the organization, which produces a positive brand image (Areiqat et al., 2020). Charles (2020) stated that workplace diversity helps build a positive customer reputation. Charles (2020) further discussed that diversity helps organizations build a more robust corporate culture that attracts team members that will remain with the organization long term, fostering a positive reputation (Charles, 2020). Roberson and Park (2004) performed a study that looked at the effects of diversity reputation on product and capital market outcomes. The results of the study showed that diversity reputation positively affected book-to-market equity and revenue growth (Roberson & Park, 2004). Based on this study, it is evident that organizations that manage diversity create a diverse reputation that can benefit the organization's performance (Roberson & Park, 2004).

In addition to the benefits of workplace diversity pointed out by Areiqat et al. (2020), Foma (2014) identified benefits such as an increased pool of candidates, improved communication, creativity, and problem-solving. Foma (2014) generalized the benefits of workplace diversity as economic benefits. Foma (2014) explained that workplace diversity increases the pool of eligible candidates by broadening the scope to include people from different backgrounds. Additionally, Foma (2014) explained that diversity within a workplace improves communication within the organization and with clients. Foma (2014) also found that a diverse workplace increases creativity, productivity and has the ability to improve problem-solving.

While many recognize the benefits of diversity, it does not come without its challenges. Diversity is not an easy concept for organizations to grasp and manage. Diversity remains a problem or challenge for many organizations (Green et al., 2002). Devoe (1999) stated that managers face many challenges in managing diversity. They may experience a loss of productivity due to prejudice, discrimination, and complaints against the organization if they do not manage diversity effectively (Devoe, 1999). While managing diversity, many face barriers that prevent the successful management of diversity (Green et al., 2002). These barriers include negative attitudes and behaviors and harmful workplace practices such as prejudice, stereotyping, and discrimination (Green et al., 2002). Even though management should not use these workplace practices, they are sometimes used and could lead to litigation costs (Green et al., 2002).

Foma (2014) named numerous issues with diversity that can affect the company's performance. Foma (2014) identified three challenges: communication problems, resistance to change, and ethnocentrism and discrimination. If left unresolved, communication barriers can hamper the organization's performance (Foma, 2014). Barriers such as differences in languages affect how workers communicate with one another, which hinders productivity (Foma, 2014). Sometimes people are change averse, which causes them to show resistance to change. Workers resistant to change are often stubborn and have difficulty following new rules, processes, and procedures (Foma, 2014). Resistance to change makes it difficult for organizations to create a new culture of diversity. As Green et

al. (2002) mentioned discrimination as a challenge to workplace diversity, Foma (2014) added ethnocentrism to the discussion by stating that this often creates a culture of favoritism. These challenges prevent successful teamwork, which organizations need to succeed, which is why a corporate leader must manage (Devoe, 1999). Patrick and Kumar (2012) completed an empirical study that affirmed the challenges presented by Devoe (1999), Green et al. (2002), and Foma (2014). Patrick and Kumar (2012) found that the barriers to workplace diversity were discrimination, prejudice, ethnocentrism, and others centered around blaming the victim.

Though challenges have been presented by Devoe (1999), Green et al. (2002), and Foma (2014), these challenges can be overcome by effective management of a diverse workplace. Foma (2014) explained that the first step to effectively managing a diverse workplace is to create a diverse workplace. Additionally, Greenberg (2012) emphasized that firms must create a strategy encompassing a culture of diversity within the organization. Greenberg (2012) stated that the strategy must flow throughout the organization to every department and every function. To do this, the organization must invest an adequate number of resources in diversity management to better prepare the organization's leaders to handle issues of a diverse workplace (Greenberg, 2012). Greenberg (2012) suggested a two-step process for creating a strategy for diversity management: assessment and implementation. Greenberg (2012) explained that the organization must evaluate the diversity process within its organization to determine challenges

and obstacles. They then must assess the current policies that may need to be added or eliminated based on the challenges presented (Greenberg, 2012). Next, the organization's leadership must incorporate diversity policies throughout the organization. They must implement a diverse workplace plan that flows through all levels of the organization, from upper management to lower-level staff (Greenberg, 2012). Greenberg (2012) also mentioned that adequate training through the organization is a necessity to change the culture to one where diversity is threaded throughout the cloth of the culture. Foma (2014) and Greenberg (2012) discussed general solutions to addressing the challenges of workplace diversity.

Patrick and Kumar (2012) provided more specific strategies that include diversity as a cultural value, increasing employee morale, productivity, and retention, placing employees in work areas where they would advance and improving relationships. Hunt et al. (2015), in a study facilitated by McKinsey and Company, found that diversity in leadership helps to create a diverse workplace. Additionally, it helps the people within the organization feel more secure and positive about a diverse workplace (Hunt et al., 2015). Davis (2018) found that the lack of diversity in leadership positions makes it difficult for organizations to create a diverse workplace. Nishii and Mayer (2009) completed a study highlighting leaders' vital role in diversity. They stated that leadership creates a pattern of inclusion (Nishii & Mayer, 2009). Essentially, while the strategies may work to start a process of creating a diverse workplace, diversity within the leadership is just as important (Davis, 2018; Hunt et al., 2015; Nishii & Mayer, 2009).

Need for Diversity in Leadership Roles

Research has shown that workplace diversity benefits an organization holistically (Hewlett et al., 2013). Therefore, many organizations have implemented diversity strategies to encourage a culture of diversity (Hewlett et al., 2013). For decades, diversity programs have increased among organizations and companies (Schoen et al., 2021). Due to diversity strategies, the number of minorities and women in middle management roles has increased; however, there is still a lack of minorities in executive leadership roles (Beckwith et al., 2016). Although there has been significant progress, the question remains as to why there is still a lack of minorities in leadership roles. Researchers have searched for reasons why diversity management has yet to increase the percentage of minorities and women in leadership roles. Some scholars have argued that leadership theories have failed to address the issue of diversity in leadership (Schoen & Rost, 2021). To address the lack of leadership theory, Fitzsimmons and Callan (2020) proposed that leadership theories need to focus on developing a leader to accompany the diversity management efforts of an organization. Kandola (2004) proposed that, in addition to leadership theories, there should be a focus on the skill development of leaders. Evidence is not lacking to show the benefit of diversity to the organization as it relates to firm performance, which should be a compelling argument to increase practical diversity efforts. Though the arguments stretch to include diversity in leadership positions, the lack of diversity in upper management persists. Studies specifically presented arguments for the advantages of gender and

racial diversity in management positions (Andrevski et al., 2014; Richard et al., 2021).

In their Harvard Business Review study, Hewlett et al. (2013) found that approaching diversity holistically and including diversity amongst leaders and team members can lead to innovation. Therefore, they created improved productivity. The study further found that companies that embrace diversity from the top down are 350 percent more likely to contribute to the organization's ability to innovate (Hewlett et al., 2013). Hunt et al. (2015), in the McKinsey and Company report, showed how diversity allows organizations to perform better financially, which is a major indication for organizations that focus on the bottom line. Many believed that, as the workforce became more diverse, diversity in leadership would follow; however, this has not been the case (Beckwith et al., 2016; Kilian et al., 2005; Schoen & Rost, 2021). Even though organizations are seeing an increase in the representation of women and minorities in leadership positions, it is still not equitable (Kilian et al., 2005). Doan and Iskandar-Datta (2021) studied whether gender diversity in the C-suite mattered. They found that operating performance with women in the C-suite increased (Doan & Iskandar-Datta, 2021). Therefore, it is not enough to implement a diversity strategy if leadership roles still lack diversity (Kilian et al., 2005).

Over the past decades, many companies have implemented diversity strategies, and as a result, minorities and women have made considerable strides in middle management (Beckwith et al., 2016). However, women and minorities have

not progressed into senior-level management positions (Beckwith et al., 2016).

Schoen and Rost (2021) recognized that diversity management has been on the rise since 1990; however, the progress has not been tremendous in executive leadership roles. (Larcker & Tayan, 2020) studied the demographic composition of the C-suite of Fortune 100 companies and found a dismal state of diversity in the C-suite. The study showed that women are underrepresented in the C-suite, holding only 25 percent of the total C-suite positions among Fortune 100 companies (Larcker & Tayan, 2020).

Additionally, women are underrepresented in positions that feed directly into future CEO positions (Larcker & Tayan, 2020). In totality, nine of the Fortune 100 companies had no women in the C-suite, while none of the Fortune 100 companies had a majority of female executives (Larcker & Tayan, 2020). Larcker and Tayan (2020) also studied racial diversity and found that only 16 percent of C-suite positions are racially diverse, and Fortune 100 companies had no racial diversity in the C-suite. Larcker and Tayan (2020) also reviewed data for Fortune 500 companies and found that women only hold 7 percent of CEO positions, while ethnically diverse executives hold 9 percent of CEO positions. In 2021, two African American women CEOs of Fortune 500 companies broke a record increasing the number of African American women to hold the seat of CEO to three. (Hinchliffe, 2021). In 2021, 41 women CEOs, 8.2% of Fortune 500 companies (Hinchliffe, 2021). The data presented by Larcker and Tayan (2020) and

Hinchliffe (2021) showed that while organizations have implemented diversity strategies, diversity is still lacking in top leadership roles.

Schoen and Rost (2021) explored the factors contributing to the lack of success in diversity management. Schoen and Rost (2021) suggested that diversity management has not lived up to its promise because organizations lose sight of the intent of diversity management. The focus of diversity management is now for organizations to comply with anti-discrimination laws and protect the organization from litigation (Dobbin & Kalev, 2016, 2019). Additionally, organizations have become more concerned with the positive effects that diversity management has on the organization's bottom line than the actual effect it has on the workplace (Schoen & Rost, 2021). Schoen and Rost (2021) pointed out that a lack of theory is one of the reasons the focus on diversity has not produced much diversity in leadership. Fitzsimmons and Callan (2020) agreed with Schoen and Rost (2021) that a deep theoretical background is lacking in diversity. Fitzsimmons and Callan (2020) addressed the inadequacies in leadership development where there is a lack of significant implications to apply a leadership theory. Organizational structures that prevent diversity in corporate leadership are often based on gender and race, which are reinforced throughout the organization (Fitzsimmons & Callan, 2020). The researchers proposed that leadership theories need to emphasize the development of a leader, how the development occurs, how to value human capital throughout the organization, and an organizational structure needs to be developed which allows for access to opportunities for progress as leaders (Fitzsimmons &

Callan, 2020). Fitzsimmons and Callan (2020) aligned with Kandola (2004), who argued that leaders must possess specific skills to increase diversity in leadership positions through diversity management. Kandola (2004) studied the types of skills that leaders should possess in order to increase diversity in leadership positions. Kandola (2004) showed that successful leaders possess skills beyond transactional leadership and are transformational. Transformational leadership is now a well-researched theory, which includes the traits associated with increased motivation, satisfaction, and performance (Kandola, 2004). Transformational leadership is the type of leadership that engages the heart and mind and motivates followers (Kandola, 2004). Research suggests that women are more likely to have traits that align with transformational leadership than men. This would mean that more women would be expected to achieve leadership positions; however, this is not the case (Kandola, 2004).

Fitzsimmons and Callan (2020) also found that diversity management can improve the diversity within an organization. However, Fitzsimmons and Callan (2020) also concluded that diversity practices coupled with family practices, which include leadership development, increase the proportion of women in leadership positions. The Fitzsimmons and Callan (2020) study echoed Giscombe and Mattis (2002), where they found that the ability to retain women of color positively correlated with supervisors who displayed supportive behaviors. Giscombe and Mattis (2002) stated that there is a sufficient financial business case for diversity as it decreases the cost of turnover and benefits the bottom line. However, the

financial business case for diversity is not enough to develop and sustain supportive relationships between supervisors and women of color (Giscombe & Mattis, 2002). The retention and elevation of women of color improve when they have supportive relationships within the organization, which ties to the family business practices presented by Fitzsimmons and Callan (2020).

Research has shown that there is a connection between an organization's performance and the implementation of diversity strategies (Doan & Iskandar-Datta, 2021; Giscombe & Mattis, 2002; V. Hunt et al., 2015). However, these studies do not address the need for diversity in leadership. Doan and Iskandar-Datta (2021) found that female CFOs experienced improved firm performance due to reduced costs and efficiency of working capital management. Other studies have examined the impact of women in leadership roles and found a firm advantage to having women in leadership roles. Eagly et al. (2003) compared the effectiveness of men versus women leaders and found that women have an advantage in their leadership style. Eagly et al., (2003) then performed a meta-analysis of women in leadership and found that women were more likely to use transformational leadership styles, which resulted in greater organizational effectiveness. Before the Eagly et al. (2003) study, Cordeiro et al. (1997) performed a quantitative study of 186 firms to analyze the relationship between the percentage of women in management and the firm's performance. The study found a positive correlation between the percentage of women in management to the firm's performance (Cordeiro et al., 1997). Noland and Kotschwar (2016) analyzed a survey of 21,980

firms from 91 countries facilitated by the Peterson Institute for International economics. Noland and Kotschwar (2016) showed that the results suggest that having women in the C-suites improves profit margins.

It is evident in the research that there is data to support the benefit of gender diversity in a leadership position; however, few studies address the direct impact of racial diversity in leadership positions. Geletkanycz (1997) found that an executive's professional and cultural experiences shape his or her strategic mindset; therefore, diversity in management has a role in the decision-making process. Nielsen & Nielsen (2013) expanded this research and found that diversity is an attribute that increases an organization's performance because nationality is a predictor of an executive's decision-making. Thus, diversity improves the organization's performance through strategic decision-making from diverse backgrounds (Nielsen & Nielsen, 2013). As it relates specifically to racial diversity, Andrevski et al. (2014) argued that it advances an organization's performance by increasing its ability to compete intensively. In their study, Andrevski et al. (2014) studied how racially diverse management influenced firm performance using competitive intensity to explain the differences. They found that firms with racially diverse management outperform homogeneous firms because they implement competitive strategies more frequently (Andrevski et al., 2014). Firms implement competitive strategies more frequently because the diverse knowledge bases allow for the exchange of information, which increases their ability to recognize and exploit opportunities (Andrevski et al., 2014). This allows for the firm to create

more competitive advantages, thus increasing market share and profits (Andrevski et al., 2014). Richard et al. (2021) examined whether racial diversity in upper management impacted firm productivity. Using a sample of 594 high-tech firms, Richard et al. (2021) found that there was a positive effect on firm productivity when there was diversity in upper and lower management. Organizations with higher levels of racial diversity in upper and lower management experienced greater productivity than others (Richard et al., 2021). In order to generalize the study, Richard et al. (2021) reviewed a sample of Fortune 500 companies and found that the findings were similar to the high-tech company sample.

African American Women in the Workplace

Previous studies discuss the disparity and challenges of minorities or women in the workplace while offering ways to mitigate the challenges (Loden, 1978; Morrison, 1992; Sue et al., 1998). These studies exclude specific discussions of African American women in the workplace. African American women have a deep history that has impacted their position in the workforce. Past research has focused more on women in the workforce without specifically researching the experience of African American women (Morrison, 1992; Sue et al., 1998). This research has produced studies on theories such as the glass ceiling coined by Marilyn Loden (1978). Though African American women have similar struggles in the workplace as white women, their plight is different. Researchers created the term concrete ceiling to explain the experiences of African- American women in the workforce (Davidson & Davidson, 1997). Ray and Davis (1988) used the term concrete ceiling to acknowledge that women face a glass ceiling of barriers as they

climb the corporate ladder. However, African American women endure additional challenges and barriers in the corporate world. Davidson and Davidson (1997) compared the glass ceiling that women experience to the concrete ceiling experience and explain that the concrete ceiling is worse and is accompanied with different challenges.

Catalyst (2009) explained that African American women find themselves at an intersection where race and gender meet, often hampering their career trajectories. Catalyst's (2009) study aligns with Ray and Davis (1988), where they found that, due to the concrete ceiling, the opportunities for African American women to advance in their careers are reduced or nonexistent. Ray and Davis (1988) and Catalyst (2009) recognized that barriers exist for white women, which is considered a glass ceiling. However, with the concrete ceiling, African American women cannot see through the concrete ceiling. Additionally, Hite (1996) proclaimed that research that implies "all women" is not differentiating between white women and women of color. Hite (1996) stated that when studies refer to women, the implication is "all women," It does not consider that white women and African- American women do not have the same experiences, nor do they experience the workplace in the same way.

Due to the implication that a white woman's experience is generalizable, researchers set out to distinguish the experience of African American women versus white women (Combs, 2003; Key et al., 2012). African American women are in a double marginalized group of minorities and women. Some research

studies have not accepted or supported the double jeopardy notion. Combs (2003) attempted to settle the dispute of the suggested double jeopardy that African American women experience in the workplace. Combs (2003) focused on the perspective of African American women and whether they perceive race and gender independently as a factor in the workplace. The study found that African American women considered race and gender as double jeopardy (Combs, 2003). African American women perceive that being a dual minority makes progressing up the corporate ladder more challenging than white women. Combs (2003) found that the dual minority status of African American women in the workplace results in lower promotion rates, job segregation, and social out-group status, which means that African- American women have to contend with more than African American men, white men, and white women.

Studies have addressed the disparity of minorities in leadership roles in the workforce; however, these studies do not address African American women specifically (Combs, 2003). African American women are in a double marginalized group of minorities and women. Because these studies do not focus much on minorities or women, the solutions or resolutions offered do not address the challenges of African American women(Combs, 2003). Bell (1992) provided a historical summary of myths and stereotypes of African American women. Bell (1992) concluded that some companies hesitate to promote African American women based on these myths and stereotypes. These myths and stereotypes have followed African American women throughout history. Therefore, they believe

African American women lack the necessary skills, business savvy, leadership, and drive to compete in the C-suite (Bell, 1992; Holder et al., 2015). These misconceptions are inaccurate over time. Based on the McKinsey and Company report by Huang et al. (2019), African- American women are ambitious. African American women are equally as likely as white men and more likely than white women to aspire to executive leadership roles (Huang et al., 2019).

Even though it is vital to distinguish African American women and white women when discussing the experience of the African American woman, the history of women in the workforce is part of the African American woman's history (Dickens & Chavez, 2018). In order to understand the issue of the African American woman's disparity in leadership roles, it is necessary to start with a historical perspective of the African American's role in the workplace. It was not until the 1940s that women began acquiring factory positions and secretarial roles (Wilson, 2017). Women were able to obtain these positions because men were unavailable. At this time, women replaced men as they were in World War II, but after the men returned home, women lost their jobs (Wilson, 2017). During this time, others discovered that women could lead; however, African American women were not included in this research (Key et al., 2012). White women are included in the normal group; therefore, the voice of the African American woman was not heard, and her experiences were not considered at this time. The African American woman was not considered for employment; therefore, they could not be considered for leadership (Johnson & Thomas, 2012). This means their

experiences, feelings, and opinions about employment and leadership were disregarded (Johnson & Thomas, 2012).

The Fair Employment Act of 1946 made discrimination and societal practices that were discriminatory illegal, yet not many African American women entered the workforce. African American women hired around the 1950s were given manual labor and low-skilled jobs (Aiken et al., 2013). It was not until after the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Women's Movement that African American women began to advance and progress in the workforce (Dickens & Chavez, 2018). African- American women began to emerge in the workforce and crossed into realms only available to white women and men (Dickens & Chavez, 2018). During the Civil Rights Movement, many companies that received federal funding had to follow legislation such as Affirmative Action to help end discrimination (Johnson, 2015). However, if an organization did not receive federal funding, it did not have to abide by the legislation, so the discriminatory practices continued and did not improve the representation of African American women in the workplace (Johnson, 2015). Pompper (2011) found that this type of legislation, including the Federal Glass Ceiling Act of 1991, continuously fails to benefit African American women. Pompper (2011) noted that, to date, African American women are still overlooked as managers and decision-makers. Parker (2005) attributed the lack of advances for African American women, even after legislation, to the fact that African American women remain hampered by the tradition of stereotypes, preconceptions, and discrimination. Harnois (2010) explains that this type of hindrance is engrained in

the politics of containment. He states that, historically, gender and racial inequality continue and place African American women in positions at the bottom, and the system keeps them there (Harnois, 2010).

Studies reveal that the occupational segregation that existed in the 1940s remains today (Key et al., 2012). Due to the pervasiveness of race and gender inequality discrimination, African American women faced a concrete ceiling, which is more of a barrier than a glass ceiling (Davidson & Davidson, 1997). While research remains divergent on the effect of double jeopardy on African American women in the workforce, statistics confirm the disparity. As of 2020, African American women held 14.2% of all management positions compared to 18.1% held by white women (Catalyst, 2021). When those positions are narrowed down to those that lead to the C-suite, African- American women held 4.1% of management positions that lead to the C-suites, while white women hold 32.8% of those positions (Catalyst, 2021). According to LeanIn.Org and McKinsey and Company, for every 100 men promoted to manager, only 58 African American women are promoted, even though African American women ask for promotions at the same rate (Lean In and McKinsey and Company, 2020).

Additionally, for every 100 men hired into management roles, only 64 African American women are hired (Lean In and McKinsey and Company, 2020). The fact that African American women are promoted less and hired less into management roles means that there are fewer African American women to promote to executive leadership roles (Lean In and McKinsey and Company, 2020). In

2020, women held leadership jobs at 37 S&P 500 companies. This was a record for the S&P 500 companies; however, none of these women were African American (Smith, 2021). Researchers may not be able to agree on whether double jeopardy exists for African American women (Combs, 2003), but current statistics show symptoms of some problems. The underrepresentation of African American women in leadership is apparent (Sharma & Sharma, 2012). Sharma and Sharma (2012) concluded that African American women face complex challenges that are caused by sexism and racism when seeking to elevate in their positions. Thus, organizations must improve gender and race balance in leadership because leadership is essential for success (Sharma & Sharma, 2012). Researchers and leaders would benefit from understanding the effect of the double jeopardy that African American women face in the workplace (Parker, 2005). Parker further proposed that research should concentrate on African American women in management positions to provide more insight beyond just women in management because of distinct differences.

African American Women in Leadership

Despite the underrepresentation of African American women in leadership roles, they demonstrate skills gained through their unique experiences (Parker & Ogilvie, 1996). African American women have unique experiences while navigating corporate America. Through these experiences, African- American women have had to utilize leadership skills, adaptive skills, creativity, and innovation (Parker & Ogilvie, 1996). These groups of skills that African American women naturally develop in the workplace benefit any organization (Parker &

Ogilvie, 1996). African American women adapt and utilize skills that they develop organically to navigate Anglo and African cultures, which is biculturalism (Parker & Ogilvie, 1996). Life experiences have forced African American women to gain leadership skills in nontraditional ways (Rosser-Mims, 2010). Sims and Carter (2019) agree with Combs (2003) and Key et al. (2012) in that, when analyzing African American women leaders in organizations, an intersectional lens is needed. Sims and Carter (2019) assert that African American women have a complex dynamic because of multiple identities, including gender, race, and social class. Jordan-Zachery (2007) explained that intersectionality means the different ways that gender and race interact to shape the dynamics of the African American woman's experience in the workforce. Parker (2005) uses intersectionality to analyze the African American woman's experience in leadership positions while in predominately white organizations. Davis (2016) agreed with Parker (2005) about the ability to use intersectionality to exam the unique interactions that shape the African- American woman's experience as a leader in the workplace.

Throughout history, African American women have been instrumental in effecting community institutional changes (Rosser-Mims, 2010). Byrd (2009) advised that African American women enact leadership based on a history of their experiences embedded in a rich culture, which comes from oppression. DeLany and Rogers (2004) posited that African American leadership was cultivated and operationalized by their historical experiences, such as their roles in the family and community. In essence, Black female leadership emerged from and is shaped by

both the external and internal forces that affect their everyday experiences. Sims and Carter (2019) recognized that a leadership style developed to address oppression differs from other styles that may be used to influence and encourage others. Therefore, African American women have different motivations while leading. They may lead with an overarching need to pursue systematic change, which may cause them to reject authority that they feel is based on unjust and oppressive systems (Sims & Carter, 2019). The positive leadership attributes of this influence for African American women are the ability to network, empower and promote solidarity to advance the entire group (Byrd, 2009; Rosser-Mims, 2010; Sims & Carter, 2019). Research has shown that organizations benefit from individuals with multiple identities, like African American women (Eagly et al., 2003; Rosser-Mims, 2010).

Parker and Ogilvie (1996) found that African American women leaders have certain behaviors that include creativity, risk-taking, divergent thinking, and complexity in their behavior. Research has found that people who have to navigate biculturalism or even multiculturalism are likely to be open to change, able to solve problems, creative and flexible (Antonio et al., 2004; Combs, 2003; Eagly & Chin, 2010; Sims & Carter, 2019). Sims and Carter (2019) concluded that these behaviors result in divergent thinking. As organizations increase diversity, this type of thinking is needed. Organizations will benefit from African American women who, as leaders, can bring their multi-faceted leadership behaviors to the workplace (Sims & Carter, 2019).

Organizations should recognize the potential presented by the low representation of African American women in leadership (Davis, 2016). When organizations recognize the potential of African American women in leadership, they can engage their unique experiences for the organization's benefit (Davis, 2016). Legislation has mandated equal opportunity, and organizations that take advantage of the benefits that African American women bring as leaders can live up to this promise (Davis, 2016). The Davis (2016) study identified the type of skills African American women would bring to the organization. The study found that African American women had to utilize specific skills to climb the corporate ladder. African American women in this study demonstrated resilience and integrity (Davis, 2016). They also showed they possessed interpersonal and social skills (Davis, 2016). In addition to the skill set, the study also showed that African American women needed to establish a network of constituents that were ranked higher. Establishing strategic relationships within the organization was just as valuable as the skills (Davis, 2016). The skills and strategic relationships assisted the African American women in the study to navigate organizational leadership challenges (Davis, 2016). In addition to Davis (2016), Sales et al. (2020) explored the experiences of African-American women who attained the C-suite and found that the skill the participants claimed as essential to their success was emotional intelligence, authenticity, agility, and resilience.

Barriers to Leadership Roles for African American Women

Women's obstacles as they climb the corporate ladder are considered the glass ceiling (Morrison & Von Glinow, 1990). However, the obstacles for African

American women must be distinguished from those of their white counterparts (Davidson & Davidson, 1997; Lott, 2009). Ray and Davis (1988) found that African American women's career advancement opportunities were significantly reduced versus white women; therefore, the concrete ceiling is more difficult to penetrate. Kilian et al. (2005) summarized the barriers to organizational advancement that minorities face as they pursue career advancement: "lack of mentors and role models, exclusion from informal networks of communication, stereotyping, and preconceptions of roles and abilities, lack of line experience, visible and challenging assignments and commitment to personal and family responsibilities" (p. 156). Kilian et al. (2005) explained the impact of each barrier.

De Janasz et al. (2003) found that having multiple mentors increased promotion rates; however, minorities still find it challenging to obtain a mentor. Giscombe and Mattis (2002) found it difficult for minorities to find mentors or role models because organizational practices often segregate them by race and gender. Additionally, the informal network groups within the workplace are based on racial and gender divides, which makes it difficult to penetrate the network (Giscombe & Mattis, 2002). Giscombe and Mattis (2002) also found that African American women have even less access to mentors because mentoring across race lines is difficult. Regarding stereotyping and preconceptions, Waters (1992) identifies two sources of resistance or discrimination against minority leaders: the presumption of incompetence and the subordinate's presumption that the leader would not fit in. Waters (1992) found that subordinates question the competency of African

American and Hispanic managers more than any other minority. Waters (1992) further found that when African American and Hispanic managers are elevated, individuals within the organization feel that they were promoted based on affirmative action. As it relates to the next barrier, the relationship, many subordinates feel that if the manager is a different race that they will be the source of conflict (Waters, 1992). Giscombe and Mattis (2002) found that it may be difficult for minorities to fit in as well. They explain that it may be difficult for minorities to assimilate to the corporate culture, which may appear to be severe and impersonal (Giscombe & Mattis, 2002). Kilian et al. (2005) explained that minorities lack access to assignments that allow for them to have visibility of their work. Catalyst (2021) studied women of color in corporate management roles for four years and found that women of color felt that access to consistent assignments with high visibility was a success factor. Kilian et al. (2005) also pointed out that when minorities have access to these assignments, they are less likely to take risks. Minorities feel they will be punished if they make one mistake or fail (Kilian et al., 2005). Therefore, minorities may not accept challenges as quickly as their counterparts, even when they find that access is granted (Kilian et al., 2005). The last barrier identified by Kilian et al. (2005) is the personal commitments of minorities. Kilian et al. (2005) discuss that women leave and re-enter the workforce when they have children. Additionally, family responsibilities can restrict advancement if organizations view family responsibilities as a distraction from commitment (Kilian et al., 2005).

Kandola (2004) categorized the barriers to executive-level positions for ethnic minorities into individual and organizational categories. Kandola (2004) listed individual barriers: stereotyping, interpersonal dynamics, and informal and formal networks. Kandola (2004) posited that the results of this study apply to ethnic minorities and other under-represented groups. Like Kilian et al. (2005), Kandola (2004) identified stereotyping as a barrier. Kandola (2004) explained that when an organization interviews minority employees, employers often accept the differences among individuals but still have their presumptions about the minority class as a whole. The lack of understanding of the culture of the minority can cause the individual not to be promoted within the organization (Kandola, 2004). Kilian et al. (2005) explained that relationships between the subordinate and manager are often barriers to leadership roles, but Kandola (2004) explained it as interpersonal dynamics. Kandola (2004) found that ethnic minority groups felt that co-worker relationships affect their job satisfaction, performance, and whether or not they would stay with the organization. Therefore, this hampers their opportunities for promotions (Kandola, 2004). Employees are likely to form informal networks that are often segregated by race and sex. Kandola (2004) found that these informal networks have an impact on filling job openings at all levels, which has a direct impact on ethnic minorities receiving promotions. In this study, Kandola (2004) tried to introduce the idea of formal networks as a solution to forming informal networks. They found that these initiatives may not be beneficial and could perpetuate feelings of isolation and segregation. Kandola (2004) concluded that

organizations must manage formal networks carefully, and the organization would have to explore issues of the cultural and ethnic makeup of the groups. In addition to individual barriers, Kandola (2004) included the following in organizational barriers: organizational culture, organizational systems and procedures, and tokenism.

The Federal Glass Ceiling Commission (1995) reported several barriers to the elevation of women and minorities reaching top management positions. They categorized these barriers as societal, governmental, internal business, and organizational structure barriers. The Federal Glass Ceiling Commission (1995) explained that societal barriers, such as bias and prejudice, were associated with factors that prevented opportunities. Regarding governmental barriers, The Federal Glass Ceiling Commission (1995) reported that no disaggregation of employment-related data would allow organizations to improve their processes. They also found a lack of consistent monitoring of government programs in place to improve diversity (The Federal Glass Ceiling Commission, 1995). Based on the Commission's report, Johns (2013) concluded that the lack of monitoring hinders governmental programs; therefore, they have less effect on minority and women employment. Johns (2013) used The Federal Glass Ceiling Commission (1995) report to conclude that the internal recruitment business hinders the progression of women and minorities from reaching senior executive leadership. Johns (2013) explained that if businesses do not actively recruit women and minorities, they will not have a pool to promote because most organizations promote from within. Johns

(2013) further explained that women and minorities face the barriers of social differences between cultures and genders of the organization once they are a part of the organization. These organizational barriers include a lack of mentoring and career pipeline barriers (Johns, 2013).

Beckwith et al. (2016) studied the obstacles and challenges that African American women face in corporate America. Beckwith et al. (2016) aligned with the previous studies presented by Giscombe and Mattis (2002), the Federal Glass Ceiling Commission (1995), Johns (2013), Kandola (2004), Kilian et al. (2005), and Waters (1992). Beckwith et al. (2016) grouped their findings into themes. The first theme identified was that African American women are disadvantaged due to double jeopardy, meaning they have different experiences from all other women and ethnic groups (Beckwith et al., 2016). The second theme is the impact of stereotypes that influence how African American women are perceived in the workplace (Beckwith et al., 2016). The third theme is that their dual bias status of race and gender often isolates them in the workplace (Beckwith et al., 2016). The fourth theme is the pressure that more is needed and expected from African American women in order for them to compete with their peers (Beckwith et al., 2016).

Erskine et al. (2021) also studied obstacles African American women face while climbing the corporate ladder. They agreed with the systematic barriers Kandola (2004) and Beckwith et al. (2016) mentioned. They explained four systematic barriers: implicit bias, the black ceiling, the institutional logic of

patriarchy and white supremacy, and emotional costs. Erskine et al. (2021) explained that African American women often encounter hidden bias around their abilities in many of the processes found within an organization which includes recruitment, promotions, and evaluations. Erskine et al. (2021) compared the black ceiling to the glass ceiling (Loden, 1978) and the concrete ceiling. Erskine et al. (2021) explained that the ceiling includes stereotypes, questioning of credibility, exclusion from informal networks, conflicted relationships, the historical impact of slavery, racial segregation, the out-group, and limited access to power within the organization. Institutional logic deals with the culture embedded in the organization that is socially constructed historical patterns, including patriarchy and white supremacy (Erskine et al., 2021). The last barrier that Erskine et al. (2021) discussed was the emotional tax that African- American women often experience. African American women have to deal with the fact that they are different from their co-workers because of their gender and race, which is levied on them as they climb the corporate ladder (Catalyst, 2002).

Navigating the Barriers and Obstacles

Kandola (2004) suggested that the approach to diversity management needs to be re-evaluated because minorities will always be in the minority. Kandola (2004) posited that there should be a new-found focus on the skills needed to create a more inclusive environment. Minorities will constantly face the barriers, obstacles, and stresses of being a minority. Therefore, strategies and skills must be taught to help people recognize and deal with them (Kandola, 2004). Kandola (2004) also found that creating networks is also helpful for minorities. Kandola

(2004) concluded that to combat the underrepresentation of minorities and women in leadership, organizations must commit to diversity, training, and development in building skills and encouraging current leadership to reflect on their behavior.

Kandola (2004) discussed what organizations could do to help minorities navigate barriers and obstacles, while Kombarakaran et al. (2008) and Hewlett et al. (2012) spoke explicitly about what tools help minorities, specifically with navigating these barriers. Kombarakaran et al. (2008) discussed the benefits of executive coaching and proclaimed that executive coaching and mentoring help to develop leadership skills. This type of coaching and mentoring helps African American women feel confident in their abilities and skills to network and advance through opportunities. Hewlett et al. (2012) found that multicultural leaders need sponsors to navigate barriers that hinder their elevation to leadership successfully. Their study found that 35% of African Americans with a sponsor were pleased with their rate of advancement compared to 35% of those without sponsorship. Hewlett et al. (2012) found that sponsors can help individuals overcome the stereotypes, biases, and exclusion that African Americans face. They explain that this strong relationship helps usher people of color into places they may not be wanted. It helps drive engagement, inclusion, retention, and innovation (Hewlett et al., 2012).

Sponsorships help people of color and the organization leverage the differences in order to benefit the organization (Hewlett et al., 2012). Johns (2013) offered recommendations for women to navigate the glass ceiling, including steps the organization can take and steps the individual can take. According to Johns (2013),

employers must be committed to diversity and equity, implement programs that impede the organizational structures that allow the barriers, and implement leadership development and training. Johns (2013) further found that leadership training programs must focus on skills that help women utilize their strengths, take risks and increase their confidence to help them break existing barriers. Johns (2013) added that women must learn to increase their social capital by building support networks by seeking mentors and sponsors.

Sales et al. (2020) agreed with the findings of Kandola (2004), Hewlett et al. (2012), and Johns (2013) regarding the strategies that African American women can use to navigate barriers to leadership roles. Sales et al. (2020) created strategies to help minorities navigate these barriers. Sales et al. (2020) studied African American women's experiences as they ascended to C-suite leadership positions. They explored the participants' experiences as they navigated barriers such as dual minority status, the concrete ceiling, bias, and stereotypes (Sales et al., 2020). After analyzing these experiences, Sales et al. (2020) offered three strategies to help African American women navigate these barriers. The first strategy is for organizations to fix their structure and culture to prevent practices that keep African American women from leadership positions (Sales et al., 2020). One way for an organization to address these structural issues is to promote networking opportunities and mentorship relationships (Sales et al., 2020). African American women leaders within the organization should lead in creating mentoring opportunities for other African American women (Sales et al., 2020). The second

strategy is to build alliances through informal and formal networks that will open up opportunities through relationships (Sales et al., 2020). The third strategy is for African American women to invest in themselves to build themselves professionally through social capital (Sales et al., 2020).

Researchers have identified strategies for organizations to implement to support minorities in navigating obstacles to leadership roles (Johns, 2013; Kandola, 2004; Sales et al., 2020). The more specific strategies for the individual include mentorships, building relationships, increasing social capital, and sponsorships (Hewlett et al., 2012; Johns, 2013; Sales et al., 2020). These assertions align with previous literature discussing mentorship's benefits for African American professionals. In 1998, Messmer found that mentorship relationships positively impact an individual's career and professional development (Messmer, 1998). Messmer (1998) explained that mentorship allows individuals to improve their leadership skills and abilities because mentors help mold the mentee's career and gain success. Messmer (1998) and Jenkins (2005) agreed that mentors are also beneficial because they can help an individual navigate unfamiliar corporate cultures. When implemented effectively, Jenkins (2005) found that a mentorship is a beneficial tool for African American professionals. Jenkins (2005) explained that mentoring helps individuals build strong networks. Jenkins (2005) further explained that there might be unspoken cultural practices that African Americans do not know. Mentoring can assist African American professionals in learning these unspoken cultural criteria (Jenkins, 2005). Jenkins (2005) further

found that African American professionals feel a lack of support within their careers, and mentorship can help foster the type of support that African American professionals need. Hewlett et al. (2012) agreed with Jenkins (2005) and added that sponsorships help individuals and organizations. Randel et al. (2021) agreed with Hewlett et al. (2012) and performed a study exploring sponsorship's impact on career advancement for African American professionals. Randel et al. (2021) explained that sponsorship is a function of the mentorship relationship. They found that sponsorship can increase career advancement for African Americans. This study looked specifically at cross-race mentoring and suggested that cross-race mentoring specifically contributes to the career advancement of African American professionals (Randel et al., 2021).

Soft Skills and Navigating Barriers and Obstacles

Researchers have identified ways for African American women to navigate career barriers. These have included sponsorship, mentorship, coaching, networking, and honing professional development (Hewlett et al., 2012; Jenkins, 2005; Johns, 2013; Kombarakaran et al., 2008; Randel et al., 2021; Sales et al., 2020). Networking is a tool that can lead to sponsorship, mentorship, coaching, and professional development advancement (Iyengar, 2017). Iyengar (2017) defined networking as a soft skill. Iyengar (2017) conducted a study that shows how networking can advance an individual's career by developing interpersonal and communication skills. De Janasz and Forret (2008) explained that employees need to network to develop and maintain relationships with others that allow for

mutually beneficial relationships. De Janasz and Forret (2008) further explained that networking allows individuals to gain access to sponsorship and social support while enhancing their social capital. Hewlett et al. (2012) and Sales et al. (2020) clarified that enhancing social capital is necessary for African American professionals to navigate barriers and obstacles to leadership roles. Interpersonal skills are necessary for networking (De Janasz & Forret, 2008).

Smith et al. (2019) agreed with Iyengar (2017) and De Janasz and Forret (2008) that networking is a soft skill that is pertinent to career advancement and success. Smith et al. (2019) explained that networking involves developing interpersonal skills, which is also a soft skill. Smith et al. (2019) found that networking is necessary to achieve success in the workplace; therefore, young professionals should focus on building soft skills. Iyengar (2017) also suggested that networking involves interpersonal and communication skills, which are soft skills that also include an individual's character traits. Iyengar (2017) put together all the soft skills that networking encompasses, such as interpersonal and communications skills, also called people skills. Because it takes all of these skills to be successful in networking, Iyengar (2017) concluded that networking is the "final frontier of soft skills" (p. 8).

Networking is more than meeting people and making connections because established relationships have to be strategic and purposeful (De Janasz & Forret, 2008; Iyengar, 2017; Smith et al., 2019). The Davis (2016) study found that African American women needed to establish a network to advance their careers.

Davis (2016) explained that the ability to establish these relationships through networking was a valuable skill set that helped them navigate their obstacles. Therefore, networking is necessary for African American women to navigate obstacles to leadership positions (Davis, 2016; Iyengar, 2017). In order to improve networking skills, professional coaching should focus on building personal traits that improve soft skills (Galvão & Pinheiro, 2019). Galvão and Pinheiro (2019) studied entrepreneurs' ability to build networks and found that soft skills were necessary. The soft skills needed noted by Galvão and Pinheiro (2019) were communication, interpersonal skills, and emotional intelligence. As De Janasz and Forret (2008), Iyengar (2017) Smith et al. (2019) noted that networking is vital to establish strategic relationships, which include, but are not limited to, mentorship, sponsorship, coaching, and professional development. These strategic relationships enable African American professionals to navigate the obstacles they face as they climb the corporate ladder (Davis, 2016; De Janasz & Forret, 2008). Overall, African American women need to improve their soft skills, allowing them to build networks to help them in their career advancement (Davis, 2016; Galvão & Pinheiro, 2019).

Soft Skills and Leadership

AbuJbara and Worley (2018) conducted a study highlighting the importance of soft skills in leadership and offering guidance on developing soft skills training. AbuJbara and Worley (2018) emphasized an increased need for soft skills due to increased cultural diversity, technological developments, and globalization. In addition, Muir (2004) proclaimed that soft skills are essential to leadership. Muir

(2004) also explained that leaders need soft skills to boost their performance as a leader. Leaders need soft skills to articulate the organization's vision, communicate, influence the organization, and delegate (Muir, 2004). A common factor researchers have found among successful leaders is a reference to skills considered "soft" (Marques, 2013). Marques (2013) studied leadership styles that included soft skills as a characteristic to determine the importance of soft skills in leadership. Soft skills are seen as a competitive advantage for companies because technologies and strategies are available to the open market, while soft skills may be lacking for some (McGahren, 2009).

Soft skills are not only a competitive advantage for the organization but can serve as a competitive advantage for the individual (Newell, 2002). Newell (2002) explained that many leaders who consider themselves smart and intelligent often disregard soft skills. The Newell (2002) study found that leaders want to be successful, so they focus primarily on their performance and often resent soft skills. While these types of leaders do not value soft skills, it gives those who develop soft skills the opportunity to obtain a competitive edge (Newell, 2002). Mumford et al. (2000) studied various leadership theories to identify behaviors required for effective leadership. Mumford et al. (2000a) and Mumford et al. (2000b) concluded that effective leadership could not be explained using specific behaviors but in terms of knowledge, skills, and capabilities. Mumford et al. (2000a) posited that necessary leadership soft skills include wisdom and intelligence, the ability to look at issues from different perspectives, problem-solving, the ability to motivate, and

flexibility. In addition to the list generated by Mumford et al. (2000a), Crosbie (2005) found that the essential soft skills for leadership are the ability to take the initiative, planning and organizing, collaboration and teamwork, the ability to develop and coach people, and presentation skills. Muzio et al. (2007) and Azim et al. (2010) studied the importance of soft skills in project management. Both studies found that soft skills play an essential role in the successful and effective leadership of projects (Azim et al., 2010; Muzio et al., 2007). Azim et al. (2010) further found that the cause of complexity within project management is the people; therefore, leaders need soft skills to manage the people effectively. Therefore, Muzio et al. (2007) and Azim et al. (2010) concluded that soft skills were a key to effective leadership. Additionally, Hind et al. (2009) performed a study to determine how to develop effective leaders to help organizations remain sustainable. This study found that soft skills are important for responsible leaders (Hind et al., 2009). The participants' soft skills identified in the study were as follows: integrity, caring for people, ethical behavior, communication, taking a long-term perspective, open-mindedness, personal life management, and emotional awareness (Hind et al., 2009).

In their book, Day and Antonakis (2018) reviewed the schools of leadership and discussed how each school of thought defined an effective and successful leader. Day and Antonakis (2018) synthesized previous literature and concluded that problem-solving is essential to leadership. Problem-solving skills help leaders improve the work culture while motivating subordinates (Day & Antonakis, 2018).

Day and Antonakis (2018) agreed with Mumford et al. (2000a), who stated that the three competencies that result in effective leadership are knowledge, social judgment, and problem-solving. Day and Antonakis (2018) emphasized problem-solving skills. Mumford et al. (2017) tied together Day and Antonakis (2018) and Mumford et al. (2000a) who explained the specific soft skills that are related to a leader's ability to solve problems and their overall leadership performance.

Mumford et al. (2017) explained that creative thinking, wisdom, sense-making, and visioning are the necessary skills for a leader to problem solve. Mumford et al. (2017) concluded that soft skills are valuable and integral to leadership.

Boyatzis et al. (2017) agreed with Mumford et al. (2000), Hind et al. (2009), and Crosbie (2005) about the association between soft skills and successful leadership. Boyatzis et al. (2017) found that a successful leader possesses “emotional self-control, adaptability, empathy, coach[ing] and mentor[ing] inspirational leadership” (p. 506). In their study, Boyatzis et al. (2017) found that other skills were important but did not have the highest rankings. Those skills include “organizational awareness, influence, teamwork, self-awareness, conflict management, and positive outlook” (Boyatzis et al., 2017, p.506). Lavender (2019) developed a list of soft skills needed for leadership based on managers in healthcare; however, Lavender (2019) showed the list to be generalizable to different fields. Lavender's (2019) list is similar to the list developed by Boyatzis et al. (2017) and draws minimally from Mumford et al. (2017). Lavender (2019) developed a list that includes teamwork, work ethics, flexibility, adaptability, time

management, empathy, self-confidence, attention to detail, positive attitude, and dealing with pressure. The skills identified by Lavender (2019) are identified to be soft skills as explained in an expanded list by Touloumakos (2020). Therefore, as Mumford et al. (2017) stated, soft skills are vital to leadership.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Overview

The study was a phenomenological qualitative approach that sought to understand the lived experience of African American women in corporate America as they ascend to corporate leadership. Qualitative inquiry is necessary when exploring a problem or issue (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A qualitative inquiry is also necessary to study human group life (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). In qualitative research, the study is done in the subject's natural settings to make sense of or interpret the idea (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Creswell and Poth (2018) outline five approaches to qualitative inquiry: narrative, phenomenological, grounded theory, ethnographic, and case theory. The phenomenological investigation describes a concept's or phenomenon's shared meaning for numerous individuals based on their lived experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The phenomenological approach versus the narrative approach was applicable in this study because it focused on what corporate African American women have in common as they experienced the phenomenon of so few African American women in corporate leadership. In this case, the phenomenological qualitative approach allowed the researcher to explore the lived experiences of African American women as they climbed the corporate ladder. Through this approach, the researcher gained insight into the barriers faced and how African American women utilize soft skills to navigate these barriers to corporate leadership. The researcher used transcendental phenomenology to focus on

descriptions of the participants' lived experiences and not the researcher's interpretations.

Worldview

Philosophical worldviews influence research and should be identified in a research study (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Creswell and Creswell (2017) identified four world views: postpositivism, constructivism, advocacy/participatory, and pragmatism. Each worldview has a different perspective on reality: ontology (Maxwell, 2012). Each worldview also has a different idea of how individuals gain knowledge from reality, which is epistemology (Maxwell, 2012). The constructivist view is that an individual's world is based on their understanding of the world and its construction (Maxwell, 2012). Under constructivism, one's view of the world is not an objective perception of reality. Constructivism recognizes that a person's perspective of reality is based on experiences and assumptions (Maxwell, 2012). Constructivists assume that people seek to understand the world and develop subjective meanings in this understanding (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). The researcher seeks to understand the complexity of different views based on these meanings instead of confining the meanings to a few categories (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Under the constructivist view, the goal of the research is to rely on the participant's view of the phenomenon studied.

Phenomenological studies, which focus on exploring an individual's lived experiences, demonstrate the constructivist worldview (Moustakas, 1994). The worldview applicable to this study is constructivism because the study is exploratory in nature. This view allows the researcher to consider human thinking,

reasoning, and perspective while examining a phenomenon, which is why it most applies to this study. Using the constructivist view, the questions to the participants were open-ended, which allowed the participant to construct the meaning of the phenomenon. This type of study allowed the researcher to create knowledge through an in-depth examination of how African-American women utilize soft skills as they navigate their way to corporate leadership. Under constructivism, the African American women participants shared their lived experiences from their perspective. The researcher was able to consider these perspectives while exploring the phenomenon of the lack of African American women in corporate leadership.

Organization of Remainder of this Chapter

The remainder of this chapter will continue to focus on the methodology of this study. It will first reiterate the research questions that are guiding this study. Then the research design and approach overview will be discussed in detail. The population, sample, and selection of participants will be described. The instrumentation, procedures, data collection, and analysis will be established and explained. Finally, this chapter concludes with a discussion of ethical considerations, researcher positionality, validity, and trustworthiness.

Research Questions

The worldview and assumptions shape the research questions in a study. It then influences how the researcher answers the questions (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

To reiterate, the questions that guided the research in this study are as follows:

Research Question: What role do soft skills play in African American women's ascension to corporate leadership roles within an organization?

Sub question 1: How does the acquisition of soft skills impact African American women's ability to break barriers to corporate leadership roles within an organization?

Research Design

Bogdan and Taylor (1975) define methodology as how a researcher approaches problems and seeks answers through processes, principles, and procedures. The research design is the plan and procedure for the research. The worldview assumptions of the researcher drive the research design decision, while it includes the details of methods (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Three factors influence the choice of research design: the research problem or the central issue of the study, the researcher's personal experiences, and the audience (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). A qualitative research inquiry is necessary if a phenomenon needs to be understood because little research exists about that concept (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). In this study, there is a gap in the literature about how African American women utilize soft skills to ascend to corporate leadership. Therefore, this is a phenomenon that needs to be understood.

In order to research human group life, a qualitative investigation is required (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). The study is done in the subject's natural circumstances to make sense of or understand the situation or phenomenon (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). A phenomenological study focuses on describing the universal experiences of the participants (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). van Manen (1990) explains that the purpose of a phenomenological study is to deduce the individual lived experiences to a universal concept and grasp that concept. In a phenomenological study, the researcher collects data from the study participants (Moustakas, 1994). The researcher then explores the experiences and develops a description of the experience's crux for all participants (Moustakas, 1994). The description includes what the participant experienced and how the participant experienced the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994).

There are two main approaches to phenomenology: descriptive and interpretive. Descriptive phenomenology is known as transcendental and interpretive phenomenology is known as hermeneutic (Langdridge, 2007). The descriptive, transcendental phenomenological study is appropriate in this case. In a transcendental phenomenology study, the researcher can look beyond the phenomena and meanings to apply a global view of the essences discovered (Sloan & Bowe, 2014). The transcendental approach allows the researcher to have objectivity about the phenomena and draw from the lived experiences expressed by the participants (Sloan & Bowe, 2014). In order to focus on descriptions of the participants' lived experiences and not the researcher's interpretations,

transcendental phenomenology was used in this study. This researcher used transcendental phenomenology because this approach allowed the researcher to study the lived experience of African American women as they navigate barriers in corporate America and how they experience it directly.

Overview of Research Approach

The most effective way of distinguishing between qualitative and quantitative studies is to view the philosophical world view research strategies used and the methods used in the study; for instance, collecting qualitative data through interviews or collecting data on instruments (Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

Emerging questions and processes are part of the research process, as are data acquired in the participant's environment, data analysis that builds inductively from specifics to broad themes, and the researcher's interpretations of the data (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Qualitative research delves into and comprehends the significance that individuals or groups attach to a social or human issue (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Quantitative research examines the relationship between variables to test objective ideas or a theory (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). The variables are then measured using instruments, resulting in numbered data examined using statistical processes (Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

Creswell and Creswell (2017) explain the factors that impact the decision to choose one approach over another for the study's design. The following factors include: the research problem, the worldview, methods, personal experiences, and the audience. According to Creswell and Creswell (2017), certain types of research problems require a specific approach. Qualitative research is appropriate when a

phenomenon should be understood (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). It is also useful when there is little research on a topic, the topic is new, or the problem has not been addressed with a particular demographic or group (Morse, 1991). Regarding philosophical worldviews, constructivism aligns with qualitative research (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Under this view, the research explores the meaning of a phenomenon through the participant's view (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Moreover, methods must be considered when deciding the approach. Qualitative research employs the following methods: open-ended questions, emerging approaches, interview data, observation data, themes and pattern interpretation, and text and image analysis (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). While considering the audience, the researcher writes for audiences interested in accepting the research (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). The type of audiences that may be interested in the research are journal readers, conference attendees, and journal editors.

Considering all of the factors listed by Creswell and Creswell (2017), the best approach for this study was a qualitative, phenomenological study. The research problem for this study is the long-standing disparity of African American women in corporate leadership caused by barriers or obstacles. This research problem presented a phenomenon that needs exploration. According to Creswell and Creswell (2017), research problems that present a phenomenon that needs to be studied should use a qualitative approach. The worldview for this study was constructivism because, under this worldview, the researcher explored a phenomenon through the participant's view. This study explored the phenomenon

using the view of the participants; thus, a qualitative approach best met the needs of this study. The methods of this study included open-ended questions, interviews, and theme and pattern interpretation, which called for a qualitative approach. As for the audience and researcher, the audience is scholarly journals, and the researcher enjoys literary writing and making observations. These two characteristics align best with qualitative research. Based on all factors presented, this research study best fits a qualitative research approach rather than a quantitative one. This study lent itself to transcendental phenomenology, allowing the researcher to analyze African American women's lived experiences as they navigated corporate America's barriers.

Phenomenology is a qualitative research method that helps researchers access people's lives to appreciate and comprehend the significance of their experiences (Wilson & Washington, 2007). There are two types of phenomenology (Sloan & Bowe, 2014). Edmund Husserl developed descriptive phenomenology, and Martin Heidegger developed interpretive phenomenology. Descriptive phenomenology is also called transcendental phenomenology; interpretive phenomenology is also known as hermeneutic phenomenology (Langdridge, 2007). This study followed Husserl's transcendental phenomenology. Husserl developed phenomenology to counteract Cartesian philosophy, which was objective, empirical, and positivist (Barnacle, 2001). Husserl saw phenomenology as a way of reaching true meaning by penetrating deeper into reality (Laverly, 2003). Husserl aspired to create a science of phenomena to explain how objects are perceived and

manifest in human awareness (Lavery, 2003). Husserl identified the 'life world' as one key aspect of his work; this concept has become the context for phenomenological studies (Langdridge, 2007). In transcendental phenomenology, the researcher can take a global view of the central idea by transcending the investigated phenomenon and meanings (Sloan & Bowe, 2014). Husserl's transcendental phenomenological research applied to this study because it explored African American women's 'life world' as they navigate barriers to ascend. In this study, the researcher transcended the meanings and phenomenon of the disparity of African American women in corporate leadership by exploring the role of soft skills in their ability to navigate barriers.

Transcendental phenomenological studies are often used in research to explore studies that are similar to this type of study. Moerer-Urdahl and Creswell (2004) used the transcendental phenomenological approach to explore the ripple effect in mentoring. This study explored the experiences of nine individuals who participated in a leadership mentoring program (Moerer-Urdahl & Creswell, 2004). The transcendental phenomenology study was appropriate because it allowed for a logical and systematic way to conduct the research. Furthermore, this design approach leads to a vital description of the experience. Like the Moerer-Urdahl and Creswell (2004) study, this study utilized the logical, coherent, and systematic elements of the phenomenological approach to lead to an essential description of African American women's experience with barriers they navigate to corporate leadership positions. Fleck et al. (2013) also used the transcendental

phenomenological approach to explore the experiences of young, non-resident, low-income African American fathers. Fleck et al. (2013) used semi-structured interviews. Fleck et al. (2013) then extracted four themes from their response. Like Fleck et al. (2013), this study utilized interviews to gather themes from African American women's responses. Compared to the two previous studies that used the phenomenological approach, it is evident that the transcendental approach was the most appropriate research plan for this study.

The transcendental phenomenological approach allowed the researcher to gain insight into African American women's experiences climbing the corporate ladder. This study lent itself to transcendental phenomenology, enabling the researcher to analyze African American women's lived experiences as they navigate corporate America's barriers. The researcher can gain an understanding of these lived experiences through the descriptions provided by the participants. This type of design allowed the researcher to understand the role of soft skills while African American women climb the corporate ladder while simultaneously navigating the obstacles they face. Through the phenomenological approach, the researcher gained a deeper meaning and understanding of African American women's plight in corporate America. Thus, the transcendental phenomenological approach was the correct approach for this study.

Population and Sample

The targeted population for this study was African American women in leadership roles within an organization. The target population was required to have at least five years of leadership experience. The researcher did not focus on one

organization but chose participants across industries, allowing different perspectives with different corporate settings and cultures. This approach was necessary to understand how soft skills play a role in African American women's journeys in different settings and cultures. The population affected by this study includes African American women and leadership amongst organizations. The study allowed them to recognize the disparity while understanding the skills that help African American women overcome the obstacles that help cause the disparity.

Purposeful sampling was used for data collection in qualitative studies (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Purposeful sampling is a commonly used technique in qualitative research for identifying and selecting information-rich participants (Palinkas et al., 2017). The type of participants in a qualitative study is critical; therefore, purposeful sampling is used (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Purposeful sampling ensures that the participants have experienced the central phenomenon of the study (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). This sampling method allows the researcher to use participants with experience and knowledge. The researcher sent out a recruitment email to her network and extensions of her network to recruit participants to the study (see Appendix C). Furthermore, Bernard (2002) noted that it is essential for the participants to be willing and available to participate. The participants must also be able to communicate their experiences expressively and reflectively (Bernard, 2002).

Selection of Participants

In a phenomenological study, Creswell and Poth (2018) recommend that the researcher interview between five and twenty-five individuals who have experienced the central idea or phenomenon of the study. Morse (1994) recommends that the researcher interview at least six participants. Morse (2000) outlines several factors influencing the number of participants required in a qualitative study to ensure saturation. The factors to consider when estimating the number of participants are as follows: the scope of the study, the nature of the topic, the quality of data, the study design, and the use of shadowed data (Morse, 2000).

In considering the data quality for this study, Morse (2000) states that some participants can offer more information about their experience than others, depending on their availability and level of distraction. Morse (2000) asserts that the richer and more focused the received data, the fewer participants a study needs. This study gathers data on target and is less convoluted but rich in experience. If this happens during the interview process, fewer participants will be needed. As for the scope of the study, the broader the scope, the more participants it would take to reach saturation (Morse, 2000). Morse (2000) further states that if the nature of the study is clear and obvious, fewer participants are needed. The phenomenon of this study was the disparity of African American women in corporate leadership and the role of soft skills as they navigate barriers. The study included twenty participants who provided rich and focused information through interviews.

The type of study design is also a consideration when determining the number of participants; for instance, when there is a group at the center of the analysis and not an individual, there will be more individuals (Morse, 1994). This study was centered on the experience of individuals; therefore, fewer participants were needed to interview. Lastly, the researcher must consider the participant's ability to relate to others' experiences (Morse, 2000). In a phenomenological study, the researcher will often interview participants several times, producing a large amount of data (Morse, 2000). If a researcher can produce a large amount of data in interviews, fewer participants are needed for the study (Morse, 2000). Based on the Morse (2000) factors and participant guidelines provided by Morse (1994) and Creswell and Poth (2018), this study used twenty participants. The Morse (2000) factors influenced the number of participants selected for this study. The study utilized the analysis of the factors provided by Morse (2000) to determine the number of participants needed, which was twenty in this study. Two interviews with the twenty participants produced a large amount of data for this study.

Instrumentation

According to Creswell and Poth (2018), the researcher is the critical instrument in a qualitative study. The researcher is a key instrument because he or she interviews the participants, observes behaviors, and examines documents (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The qualitative researcher designs the instrument using open-ended questions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In this study, the researcher utilized semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions to elicit opinions and views from the participants. According to Creswell and Creswell (2017), the more open-

ended the questions, the easier for the researcher to listen to the participants' accounts of their experiences in their settings. van Manen (2017) outlines assumptions about phenomenology that harm the study. One of the assumptions is that phenomenological questions will automatically come out of interviews (van Manen, 2017). If the researcher is unclear about the phenomenological question, it hinders gathering helpful information about the lived experience (van Manen, 2017). The interview questions must be appropriate to record common themes (van Manen, 2017). Therefore, for this study, the interviews will align with the research questions in Figure 9.

Figure 9

Draft Interview Questions Alignment with Research Questions

Research Question	Interview Questions
Demographic Information (Questionnaire) (see Appendix E)	Full Name Gender Ethnicity Title Leadership Team Length of time with the organization Length of time in career Length of time in position
What role do soft skills play in African American women's ascension to corporate leadership roles?	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What skills do you feel were the most helpful in getting you to where you are? 2. Please explain how you feel you utilized these skills along your corporate journey. 3. How would you describe the definition of soft skills? What are soft skills? 4. Please describe the soft skills that you feel you possess.

	<p>5. How do you feel you attained those skills? You can focus on any informal attainment of these skills such as exposure, surroundings, environment, experiences, personality, or anything outside of formal training?</p> <p>6. Let us talk about any soft skills training you have received prior to your career or during your career. Can you describe and explain any soft-skills training that you have received? In this question, you can focus on formal training you have received, whether in a classroom or training on the job.</p> <p>7. Please explain the skills that are necessary for you to perform your role in your organization successfully. You can focus on any skills you use every day that you consider essential to your job.</p> <p>8. What have you experienced as you have climbed the corporate ladder as an African American woman utilizing soft skills?</p> <p>9. How have you utilized soft skills along your journey?</p> <p>10. What was your experience with utilizing soft skills?</p> <p>11. What role, if any, did soft skills play as you climb the corporate ladder?</p> <p>Now, I am going to shift the questioning to a specific set of soft skills? (Using the Top 10 Leadership Soft Skills) Please answer the following questions about the Top 10 Leadership Soft Skills:</p> <p>12. Do you feel that you possess each of these skills?</p>
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	<p>13. For those that you do possess, how do you feel that you acquired those skills? You can focus on any informal attainment of these skills such as exposure, surroundings, environment, personality, experiences or anything outside of formal training?</p> <p>14. For those on the list that you lack, why do you feel that you lack those skills?</p> <p>15. Please explain the skills from the list that are necessary for you to perform your role in your organization successfully. Please discuss each one. You can focus on any skills you use every day that you consider essential to your job.</p> <p>16. How do you feel each of these skills has helped you add value to your organization?</p> <p>17. What impact, if any, did each of these skills have on your ability to become an effective leader?</p> <p>18. What have you experienced as you have climbed the corporate ladder as an African American woman utilizing each of the top 10 leadership soft skills?</p> <p>19. For those of the top 10 leadership soft skills, how have you utilized each of them along your journey? (Discuss each skill)</p> <p>20. What was your experience with utilizing each of the top 10 leadership soft skills?</p> <p>21. What role, if any, did each of the top 10 leadership soft skills play as you climb the corporate ladder?</p>
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<p>How does the acquisition of soft skills impact African American women's ability to break barriers to executive leadership roles within an organization?</p>	<p>22. What type of barriers have you experienced along your journey as you climb the corporate ladder?</p> <p>23. What has been your experience in utilizing soft skills as you have navigated barriers to leadership? (This question is referring to the soft skills that you spoke about in general)</p> <p>24. Which of the top 10 leadership soft skills do you feel were most helpful in navigating barriers to leadership? Please explain each one.</p> <p>25. For each of the barriers that you explained please tell how each of the top 10 leadership soft skills impacted your ability to navigate each of barrier?</p>
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Procedures

In order to answer the research questions, data was collected through interviews. The interview questions are what the researcher asked the participant to understand the central ideal of the study, which is different from the research questions (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). The research questions are what the researcher wants to understand about the phenomenon (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). According to Creswell and Poth (2018), after it is established that a phenomenological study is best for the approach, the phenomenon is described, and the philosophical assumptions are identified, data is collected from individuals who have experienced the phenomenon. Open-ended questions were aligned with the research questions in Figure 4. Figure 4 shows how the open-ended interview questions aligned with the research questions. The researcher focused on the data

that leads to structural and textual descriptions of the participants' experiences in corporate America. The structural and textual descriptions allowed the researcher to understand the common experiences of the participants as they climb the corporate ladder (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Based on Creswell and Poth (2018), the researcher generated themes by analyzing the participants' significant statements. The themes came from the cluster of meanings drawn from the participants' statements. Next, the researcher used the themes to generate a description of the participants' experience navigating barriers to corporate leadership using soft skills.

Additionally, the researcher described the context that influenced the participants' experience navigating barriers to corporate leadership positions using soft skills. Using the suggestions of Moustakas (1994), the researcher used a journal to write down her own experience and influences in corporate America, utilizing soft skills to navigate barriers to leadership roles. Subsequently, the researcher integrated all textual and structural descriptions into a composite description to report the phenomenon's essence. Last, the researcher presented the understanding of African American women's use of soft skills to navigate barriers to corporate leadership. The understanding was drawn from the common meanings of the experiences of African American women. The writing shows an understanding of the role of skills in the African American woman's ability to navigate barriers as they ascend.

Data collection

According to Creswell and Creswell (2017), the researcher is the primary data collection instrument in qualitative studies. The data collection method used

in this study was interviews. Creswell and Creswell (2017) stated that interviewing is a valuable way of accessing descriptions of actions and events that have taken place where the researcher cannot gain insight through observations. The Interview questions generated through alignment with the research questions were used (see. African American women in leadership roles within their organizations were interviewed. The researcher followed the interview protocol when asking questions. At times, the interviewer had to clarify or add more details to the question at the participant's request. The interviews were conducted using Zoom. The interviews were transcribed using NVivo. After transcription, the researcher provided the transcripts to the participants for member-checking. The researcher also held follow-up interviews using NVivo to ensure the researcher accurately interpreted the data collected.

Data Analysis

According to Creswell and Creswell (2017), data collection and analysis should be done simultaneously. The researcher will utilize the steps for qualitative analysis outlined by Maxwell (2012) and Zhang and Wildemuth (2009). Maxwell (2012) explained the steps of qualitative data analysis. Maxwell (2012) outlines the first step to read and listen to the transcribed interviews. Based on Maxwell (2012), the researcher listened to the interviews and created memos and notes on what she read and heard. From these notes, the researcher gathered possible categories. Next, the researcher grouped the data's similarities and differences to define the categories by coding. Zhang and Wildemuth (2009) provide detailed steps for qualitative data analysis, which include:

1. Prepare the data
2. Define the unit of analysis
3. Develop categories and coding scheme
4. Test the coding scheme on a sample text
5. Code all the text
6. Assess coding consistency
7. Draw conclusions from the coded data
8. Report your methods and findings.

The researcher analyzed the data within this study using the list provided by Zhang and Wildemuth (2009):

Prepare the data. The researcher transformed the interview data into written text using a transcribing service.

Define the Unit of Analysis. The unit of analysis used for this study was individual themes. Zhang and Wildemuth (2009) state that qualitative analysis calls for using a theme versus words or sentences as the unit for analysis.

Develop Categories and a Coding Scheme. Categories and coding schemes were derived from the literature, current theories, and interview data. The researcher utilized coding software., NVivo Additionally, the researcher utilized the constant comparative method developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967). The constant comparative method allows the researcher to gain original insights and notice the differences between the categories.

Test Coding Scheme on a Sample Text. Zhang and Wildemuth (2009) suggest that the coding scheme should be tested for clarity and consistency of category definitions. Therefore, the researcher tested the coding scheme using a sample to ensure the coding was consistent. The coding scheme was tested before all of the text was coded.

Code All the Text. The researcher applied the coding scheme to the remainder of the text generated from the transcribed interviews.

Assess Coding Consistency. After all of the text was coded, the researcher reverified if the coding was consistent with all text, including assessing whether new codes had been added and the researcher's consistent understanding of the code (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009).

Draw Conclusions from the Coded Data. The researcher tried to understand the themes and categories identified during this step to make sense of the phenomenon. According to Bradley (1993), to draw conclusions from coded data, the researcher explored the features and dimensions of categories, established linkages between categories, uncovered trends, and tested categories against the complete range of data.

Report Methods and Findings. The researcher reported her coding process and methods used. The researcher presents the study results in Chapter 4 using a balance between descriptions of the African American woman's experience in corporate America and the researcher's interpretation.

Ethical Consideration

Creswell and Poth (2018) discuss the ethical considerations for qualitative studies, including ethical considerations for data collection, analysis, and writing. The researcher must respect the participant's rights, needs, values, and preferences (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Additionally, the researcher must take steps to ensure the integrity of the data collected and analyzed (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). As stated by Creswell and Poth (2018), prior to conducting the study, the researcher gathered University approval from the institutional review board (see Appendix A and B). According to the Florida Institute of Technology, human subjects research regulations, any research involving human subjects that are sponsored by the University, conducted under the direction of a University employee, on the University property, or involves the University's nonpublic information to identify subjects must be reviewed by the institutional review board (Florida Institute of Technology, 2022). The researcher applied to the institutional review board before any research work started (Florida Institute of Technology, 2022). The institutional review board approved all research protocols before implementation, including protocol changes (Florida Institute of Technology, 2022) (See Appendix B).

In order to protect the participants, the researcher followed the steps outlined by Creswell and Creswell (2017) and the Florida Institute of Technology human subjects research regulations. The researcher explained to the participants how the data would be used in writing and verbally. Next, the researcher had participants sign an informed consent. Florida Institute of Technology provides a template for the informed consent forms. The researcher adapted the Florida

Institute of Technology informed consent form (APPENDIX D) to fit the study. Subsequently, the researcher filed with the Institutional Review Board. The researcher informed the participant of all data collection software and devices. Following the transcription of the interviews, the researcher provided the participant with the transcriptions. When reporting the data, the researcher considered the participants' interests and allowed the participant to decide anonymity. The participants chose a pseudonym prior to the interview. Lastly, regarding ethical writing considerations, the researcher ensured the application of appropriate reporting strategies and compliance with ethical publishing practices.

Researcher Positionality

The researcher's positionality guides qualitative research; therefore, the researcher must be honest and authentic about her own stance and position (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Savin-Baden and Major (2013) offer three ways that the researcher can develop and identify her positionality. First, the researcher must acknowledge personal positions that may influence the study (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). Second, the researcher must understand how the participants may view them and how they view themselves (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). Third, the researcher must acknowledge that they and the context can influence their research (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013).

The researcher in this study is an African American woman employed in higher education at a Historically Black College and University in a leadership role. The leadership role is considered middle management. The researcher's employment background includes law and internal audit, where she was not in

leadership. The researcher has created a soft skills program at her institution to focus on soft skills. She is interested in their role in corporate America pertaining to African Americans. The researcher's career journey does not mimic African American women in corporate America. She is not an ethnic minority within the organization; therefore, many of the barriers experienced by the participants will not be the same as those experienced by the researcher. This will allow the researcher to remain honest while limiting the amount of influence over the study.

Validity and Trustworthiness

The researcher must show validity by checking the accuracy of the findings. Creswell and Creswell (2017) offer validity strategies for the researcher. Sandelowski (1993) explains that the study's transparency level determines whether the study is considered trustworthy. If the practices used in the study are visible and auditable, then the study will be considered trustworthy (Sandelowski, 1993). In this study, the researcher outlined the practices and procedures used in the study to ensure that they are visible and auditable. The researcher utilized the validity strategies and reliability procedures offered by Creswell and Creswell (2017) to ensure validity.

Following Creswell and Creswell (2017), the researcher checked transcripts to ensure reliability and that no mistakes were made during transcribing. The researcher ensured no shift in the definition of the codes by comparing data with the codes and writing notes. The researcher utilized the following validity strategies outlined by Creswell and Creswell (2017): member checking, use of detailed descriptions, clarifying bias, present negative information. In addition to the

strategies offered by Creswell and Creswell (2017), the researcher conducted a pilot study. The pilot participant was not involved in the study. She was asked questions from the interview protocol. Based on how she answered specific questions, the researcher had to adjust the order and wording of some of the questions.

Moreover, member checking was utilized by presenting the final report and themes to the participants in a follow-up interview. The follow-up interview allowed the researcher to check for accuracy and comment on the findings. While writing the findings, the researcher presents the findings using rich descriptions that provide details about the participants' perspectives on the themes. The detailed descriptions allow readers to understand the participants' settings and shared experiences. The next validity strategy that the researcher utilized was to clarify bias. The researcher self-reflected by taking notes and memos. The researcher was also transparent in the discussion of her positionality. Lastly, the researcher ensured that discrepant information contradicting the themes was presented to add credibility to the study.

Chapter 4: Findings

Overview

This phenomenological study aimed to explore the role of soft skills amongst African American women as they navigate barriers to corporate leadership and raise awareness of the impact of soft skills on their ability to attain corporate leadership roles. This study discovered common meanings and trends for African American women who have navigated barriers as they have attempted to elevate to corporate leadership positions. Several themes emerged throughout this study that provide insight into African American women's use of soft skills along their corporate journey. These women are a dual minority; therefore, they are in a group that faces unique challenges. These unique challenges are barriers to corporate leadership that include myths and stereotypes about job capabilities, occupational segregation, lack of mentors, exclusion from networks, lack of meaningful assignments, corporate culture, organizational systems, implicit bias, limited access to power, and the emotional tax (Beckwith et al., 2016; Bell, 1992; Erskine et al., 2021; The Federal Glass Ceiling Commission, 1995; Giscombe & Mattis, 2002; Holder et al., 2015; Johns, 2013; Kandola, 2004; Key et al., 2012; Kilian et al., 2005). African American women have developed a unique skill set due to the challenges that they have faced (Davis, 2016). These skills, rather learned or innate, add to African American women's KSAOs that benefit the individual and the organization (Ployhart & Moliterno, 2011; Ployhart et al., 2014; Davis, 2016).

The skills African American women have developed and utilize in leadership positions align with the top ten leadership soft skills Kalman (2012) has identified:

- Self-awareness
- Learning agility
- Emotional intelligence
- Resiliency
- Building relationships at all levels
- Political savvy
- Motivating and engaging others
- Building and leading effective teams
- Communication
- Creating a culture of trust and respect (pp. 1-2)

This study explored twenty African American women's lived experiences and perspectives in leadership positions. The researcher interviewed twenty participants and used the NVivo 12 software to organize and code the transcripts. Through coding and analysis, the researcher identified emerging themes in this study that showed that soft skills played a role in African American women's ability to navigate barriers to corporate leadership while adding value to the organization. The findings in this study indicated that African American women utilized a set of soft skills along their corporate journey, and these soft skills impacted their ascension. This chapter will present the findings and results of this study, including a discussion of emerging themes. The discussion of the analysis

and emerging themes seek to provide answers to the research questions. To reiterate the research questions that guided the research:

Research Question: What role do soft skills play in African American women's ascension to corporate leadership roles within an organization?

Sub question 1: How does the acquisition of soft skills impact African American women's ability to break barriers to corporate leadership roles within an organization?

Organization of the Remainder of the Chapter

The remainder of the chapter will focus on the results and findings of the study. The first section of this chapter will discuss the participant profiles. The participant profiles will be followed by a discussion of the research findings and then a synthesis and summary of the data. The chapter will end with a discussion of the contribution of the study to applied practice.

Participant Profiles

Lisa J-08

Lisa is a Finance Business Partner with a major technology company. Her position within her company is considered middle management. Lisa holds an MBA and an engineering degree. Before she entered finance, she worked as an electrical engineer. Lisa has been with her current company for one year but has been in the technology industry for six years. For her entire tenure within the industry, she has been in leadership. Lisa's interview was conducted using Zoom. Lisa was enthusiastic, open, and forthcoming in her interview about her experiences as an African American female in corporate America. She did not spare any of her feelings about her experiences. She emphasized that African

American women in “tech” are scarce. She stated that throughout her career as an engineer or in finance, she has always been the minority. Therefore, she can offer much information about her experience. Her overall feeling about soft skills was that they are not a big deal in tech. She feels that white males ascend all the time within the tech industry while lacking soft skills. However, as a black woman, soft skills are mandatory even in tech. She made these sentiments known throughout her interview. She feels that her experiences as a black woman in tech sometimes make her not want to ascend further in her career.

Lily B-16

Lily is a project manager with a Fortune 500 technology company. Her position within the company is considered middle management. Lily leads teams over various projects. She is a certified public accountant, holds an accounting degree, has been with her organization for eight years, and has been in leadership for four years. Lily has spent half of her career in Asia and the other half in the United States. Lily’s interview was conducted via Zoom. Lily was not very talkative in her interview, as her personality is reserved. For her to provide more thorough answers, the interviewer had to pull some information by asking her to elaborate. After reviewing the transcripts, the interviewer followed up with Lily to clarify some answers. She feels that her technical skills allowed her to obtain her positions; however, soft skills are necessary to ascend. She feels that the higher you climb, the more you need soft skills, and she emphasized throughout her interview that soft skills are essential as a manager of people.

Angel D-99

Angel is a territory sales manager, considered middle management within the medical sales industry. She has worked in the industry for over twenty years and in leadership for nine years. Angel has a bachelor's in business and an MBA and has been with her organization for five years. Angel's interview was conducted via Zoom. She was excited about participating in the interview because of the topic. Angel provided concise yet thorough answers to the questions. Angel feels that soft skills are why she attained her current position. Throughout her interview, she repeatedly mentioned that she would be unsuccessful without soft skills. Angel pointed out that the sales industry differs from finance or accounting because her success depends on relationships. She feels that someone cannot build relationships without soft skills.

Tracy H-96

Tracy is a vice president in the financial services industry. Her position is considered top-level management and one level away from the C-suite. Tracy's career has spanned over twenty-five years. Tracy has been in leadership for fourteen years and with her current company for one year, which gives her the most experience out of all the study participants. She is also one of the highest-ranked persons interviewed. Tracy's interview was conducted via Zoom, and she was very open. Tracy told many stories throughout her interview to give examples of her experiences during her career. Her responses were very colorful and thorough. Tracy feels that her technical skills allowed her to get into her career, but her soft skills helped her to move upward. Tracy has stated that she uses her soft skills and

networking to attain the C-Suite. She feels she is very close to obtaining a position there. She expressed that this study is pertinent to her current life.

Shirley G-77

Shirley is a senior business manager in technology gaming for a Fortune 500 company. Shirley has been in her career for ten years, with her company for seven, and in leadership for three years. Shirley's interview was conducted over Zoom. She was willing to answer the questions openly and honestly and was forthcoming about her experiences while offering thorough responses. Shirley gave examples of her experiences as an African American woman in corporate America. She started her career in public accounting, where she felt that technical skills were more important than soft skills. Shirley believes that soft skills helped get her in the door and helped her elevate; however, she stated that with soft skills getting a person in the door, they have to be able to perform the technical side of the job.

Kara J-01

Kara is a project manager in the software industry. She has been in the industry for ten years and in leadership for four years. She leads teams and projects within her organization. Her position is considered lower-level management. Kara has expressed that ascension within her current organization may be difficult based on the organization's landscape. The interviewer asked what she meant by the organization's landscape. She explained that all top leaders are white males and the organization has a tight-knit network that she will likely never be able to join. She sees herself leaving soon to obtain upward mobility and uses her networking and soft skills to attain a position within another organization. Although she is in the

software industry, she believes that soft skills are just as necessary as technical skills for upward movement in her career.

Brittney B-14

Brittney is a senior manager in the public accounting industry. She has an accounting degree and has been in the industry for fifteen years, including being in leadership for six years. She has considered middle management because she does lead teams within the organization. Brittney has expressed that she actively seeks promotion and elevation within this organization. She has always used soft skills during her career to network and build relationships to gain access to the organization's decision-makers. She stated that a person has to know how to do their job in this field; however, soft skills and relationships are just as important.

Lacy N-41

Lacy is a human resource manager in the pharmaceutical sales industry. She has been in the industry for fourteen years and in leadership for eight years. Her highest degree is an MBA. Lacy has been with the same company for her entire career. Her perspective differs from the other participants because she does not want to leave her organization. She wants to elevate in her current organization. She believes that in human resources, soft skills are essential. She mentioned that her relationships with the employees and higher-ups are critical to her success. Soft skills are necessary for her position and ascension within the organization.

Faith P-21

Faith is a frontline supervisor in the manufacturing industry. She has been with her organization for eight years but has been in leadership for twenty-two

years. The highest degree she has obtained is an MBA. Her current position is considered middle management. Faith started her career in a leadership position at lower-level management. Her perspective differs from the other participants because she has been in the leadership her entire career. She has moved up in her career to hold a middle management position and desires to elevate. Faith was interviewed via Zoom during her work day. It was evident that Faith was busy during the interview. She answered the questions shortly and to the point. Though her answers were concise, she provided a wealth of information. She feels that she would not have been able to elevate in this male-dominated industry without soft skills and understands that hard work pays off, but she expressed that a person's work can sometimes be overlooked if they lack soft skills.

Sofia C-10

Sofia is a senior business manager in the pharmaceutical industry. She has been in the industry for twenty years and has been in leadership for six years, and she has an MBA degree. Sofia has been at different companies within the pharmaceutical industry for her entire career. She manages client relationships and teams within the organization. Sofia was interviewed via Zoom during her work day. It was evident that she was busy because she provided short responses. The interviewer asked follow-up questions where necessary to attain clarity of the answers. She emphasized that soft skills are essential for managing co-worker and client relationships. She does not feel she could have been successful without soft skills.

Paige M-83

Paige is the associate director of medical evaluation and post-market evaluation for a pharmaceutical and medical device company in the medical care industry. Paige's highest degree is a Doctorate of Pharmacy, and she also has an MBA. Paige has been with her current organization for ten years and has been in leadership for fourteen years. Her current position is two levels away from the C-suite. Paige was interviewed via Zoom. She was very excited to discuss the topic because of her challenges as a black female in corporate leadership. Paige has clarified that she does not desire the C-suite because she appreciates work-life balance. She understands the importance of soft skills in helping network and builds relationships at all levels. She mentioned that soft skills were vital to her career.

Tina F-13

Tina is currently the founder and chief executive officer of a healthcare company. Tina has over nineteen years of leadership experience in the healthcare industry. The highest degree that she has earned is a master's degree. Tina's perspective is unique for this study because she worked in corporate America within management and now runs her own organization. Tina was interviewed via Zoom. She was very open and honest about her experiences within corporate America and why she decided to start her own business. She felt that she would better use her talents within her organization. She discussed the barriers she faced within corporate America as an African American female. Tina explained that soft

skills were important in corporate America as she fought to overcome the barriers; however, it became evident that she needed to start her own business.

Margarita H-01

Margarita is the director of development for a consulting organization in the education industry. She has been with her organization for twenty-one years and in leadership for seventeen years. Margarita's highest degree is a master's, and she is currently working on a doctorate degree. She was interviewed via Zoom. Margarita was busy during her interview because she was at work. Her answers were short, and she seemed hesitant to answer openly. The interviewer explained that she could be honest and open because the interview was anonymous. The interviewer also explained that she did not have to be politically correct. After giving the disclaimers, Margarita was more open about her experience as an African American woman in leadership. Margarita's position is one level away from the C-suite. She is the only African American at her level within her organization. She is pursuing her terminal degree, hoping to elevate to the C-suite. Margarita uses her soft skills to build relationships and network within her organization. She does not believe she could be in her position without soft skills.

Katrese M-23

Katrese is a systems engineer manager for a major aerospace defense industry corporation. Katrese has worked with the company for eighteen years and has been in leadership for seven years. Her position is considered middle management. The highest degree she has obtained is an MBA. Katrese's interview was held via Zoom after a long workday. It is evident that Katrese was tired but

willing to engage in the interview. Her answers were concise and to the point. The interviewer had to ask her to elaborate at specific points throughout the interview. Katrese feels her job is highly technical, and an individual contributor could succeed without soft skills. However, to move up, soft skills are mandatory.

Tyra M-54

Tyra is a senior territory business manager in the medical device industry. Tyra was in the pharmaceutical sales industry for seventeen years before transitioning to medical devices. She has been in leadership for three years in middle management. Her highest degree attained is an MBA. Tyra was interviewed via Zoom. She was very willing to participate in the study. She seemed naturally talkative, so it was easy for her to answer the questions thoroughly. She also provided explicit examples of her experiences as an African American female in corporate America. She spoke thoroughly about the need for soft skills in her industry; she manages outside client relationships or in-house networking. She does not feel that she would be successful without soft skills.

Ashley W-04

Ashley is a senior team lead in customer insights in the market research industry. Ashley has been in the marketing industry for twenty years, with her current company for six years, and in leadership for six years. Her current position is considered middle management. Her highest degree attained is an MBA. Ashley's interview was conducted via Zoom. During her interview, she made it clear that it was a busy day for her, but she wanted to commit to the interview. Even though she was busy, her interview did not seem rushed. She made sure to

answer the questions thoroughly. Ashley spoke about being an individual contributor on a team versus a leader before she was in leadership. She felt that soft skills helped differentiate her within the group. She felt she stood out amongst the group, which elevated her career.

Josephine F-22

Josephine is the Head of Talent Acquisition for Enterprise Legal Functions at a Fortune 500 healthcare company. Josephine has been at her current organization for three years and in leadership for eleven years. The highest degree that Josephine has obtained is a Juris Doctorate. Josephine is considered top-level management. Josephine's interview was conducted via Zoom. Josephine was happy to contribute to this study, stating that many black women do not reach her level, so she was delighted to give any information about her journey. Josephine provided comprehensive answers, along with examples. She was not afraid to overshare her experiences as a black woman in corporate America. She spoke candidly about the barriers she has experienced and her use of soft skills. While others may not need soft skills, she believes black women must hone their soft skills to ascend in corporate America.

Maureen H-33

Maureen is currently the CEO of her consulting firm. Maureen was in the healthcare industry's marketing and sales for twenty years before starting her own company. While in corporate America, she held various leadership roles and has been in leadership for thirteen years. Her highest degree obtained was a Doctorate. Maureen was interviewed via Zoom. Maureen was articulate throughout the

interview and did not hesitate to share information about her experiences as a black female. Maureen feels that soft skills are what helped her stand out throughout her career. She talked about how soft skills are necessary as she runs her firm.

Demi J-19

Demi is a diversity program manager in the food service industry. She is considered middle management in the organization. Demi has been with her current organization for two years but in leadership for six. Demi's highest degree is a master's in management. She is also a published author. Her interview was conducted via Zoom. Demi's answers were explanatory and descriptive, and she was a natural storyteller; she gave many examples to ensure her points were understood. She was enthusiastic about her participation in the study. Demi believes that soft skills are more necessary in her role than technical skills. She stated that her job is about people, and people skills are mandatory for her to do her job successfully.

Gia S-91

Gia is the Director of Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Engagement in the hospitality industry. She has been with her current organization for two years. Her position is considered middle management. She has been in human resources for eighteen years and in leadership for seven years. Gia's interview was conducted via Zoom. She was willing to offer plenty of information about her experiences and had much information to share, as she has been in human resources for all her careers. She thoroughly understands the necessary skills to perform many jobs within an organization. She believes that soft skills work in conjunction with

technical skills to enable success in one's career. As for her journey, she believes that she would not be successful without soft skills.

Figure 10

Summary of Participant Profiles

Lisa J-08	Lily B-16	Angel D-99	Tracy H-96	Shirley G-77
Finance Business Partner MBA Technology 10 Years in Career Mid-Level Mgmt 6 years in Leadership	Project Manager Bachelors Technology 10 Years in Career Mid-Level Mgmt 4 years in Leadership	Territory Sales Manager MBA Medical Sales 20 Years in Career Mid-Level Mgmt 9 Years in Leadership	Vice President MBA Financial Services 25 Years in Career Top-Level Mgmt 14 Years in Leadership	Senior Business Manager Bachelors Technology-Gaming 10 Years in Career Mid-Level Mgmt 3 Years in Leadership
Kara J-01	Brittney B-14	Lacy N-41	Faith P-21	Sofia C-10
Project Manager Masters Software 10 Years in Career Low-Level Mgmt 4 Years in Leadership	Senior Manager Masters Public Accounting 15 Years in Career Mid-Level Mgmt 6 Years in Leadership	Human Resources Manager MBA Pharmaceutical 14 Years in Career Mid-Level Mgmt 8 Years in Leadership	Frontline Supervisor MBA Manufacturing 22 Years in Career Mid-Level Mgmt 8 Years in Leadership	Senior Business Manager MBA Pharmaceutical 20 Years in Career Mid-Level Mgmt 6 Years in Leadership
Paige M-83	Tina F-13	Margarita H-01	Katrese M-23	Tyra M-54
Associate Director Doctorate Healthcare 20 Years in Career Mid-Level Mgmt 14 Years in Leadership	CEO Masters Healthcare 26 Years in Career Top-Level Mgmt 19 Years in Leadership	Director of Development MBA Educational Consulting 21 Years in Career Top-Level Mgmt 17 Years in Leadership	Systems Engineer Manager MBA Aerospace Defense 18 Years in Career Mid-Level Mgmt 7 Years in Leadership	Senior Territory Business Manager MBA Medical Device 20 Years in Career Mid-Level Mgmt 3 Years in Leadership
Ashley W-04	Josephine F-22	Maureen H-33	Demi J-19	Gia S-91
Senior Team Lead MBA Market Research 20 Years in Career Mid-Level Mgmt 6 Years in Leadership	Head of Talent Acquisition Doctorate Healthcare 14 Years in Career Top-Level Mgmt 11 Years in Leadership	CEO Doctorate Consulting 20 Years in Career Top-Level Mgmt 13 Years in Leadership	Diversity Program Manager Masters Food Service 21 Years in Career Mid-Level Mgmt 6 Years in Leadership	Director of Diversity Equity Inclusion MBA Hospitality 18 Years in Career Mid-Level Mgmt 7 Years in Leadership

Figure 11

Participant Levels of Management

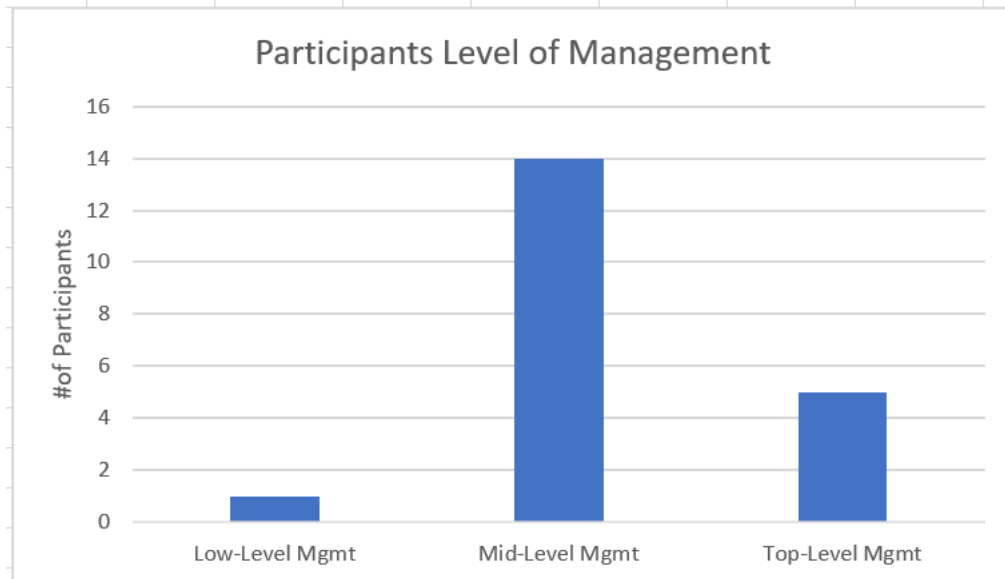
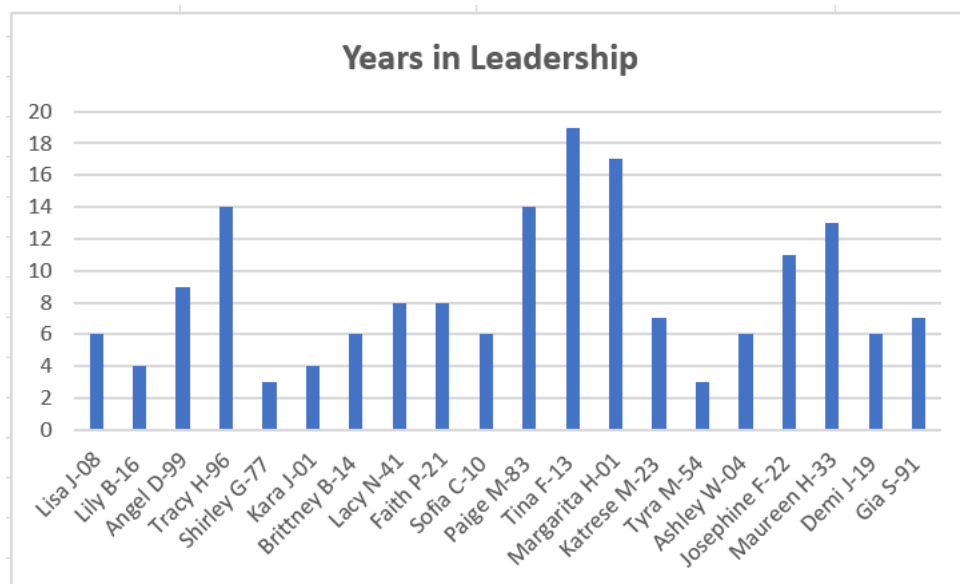


Figure 12

Participant Years in Leadership



Research Questions and Interviews

The researcher aligned the interview questions with the research questions. See Figure 7 to gain insight into the research questions. The interview questions were to understand the role of soft skills in an African American woman's ability to navigate barriers to corporate leadership. The main research question was about what role soft skills play in African American women's ascension to corporate organizational leadership. This was the overall question in the study, with a more specific sub-question that focused directly on the ability to navigate barriers to corporate leadership. To understand the role of soft skills, it is necessary to present the data collected from the interview questions that lead to understanding the role of soft skills. Therefore, this section will discuss the findings for each interview question, including the emerging themes. The first set of interview questions allowed the participants to discuss soft skills from their perspective of the definition of soft skills. Therefore, the participants provided definitions and discussed soft skills from their perspectives. The second set of interview questions focus on the Center for Creative Leadership's top ten soft leadership skills (see Figure 6)

General Useful Skills

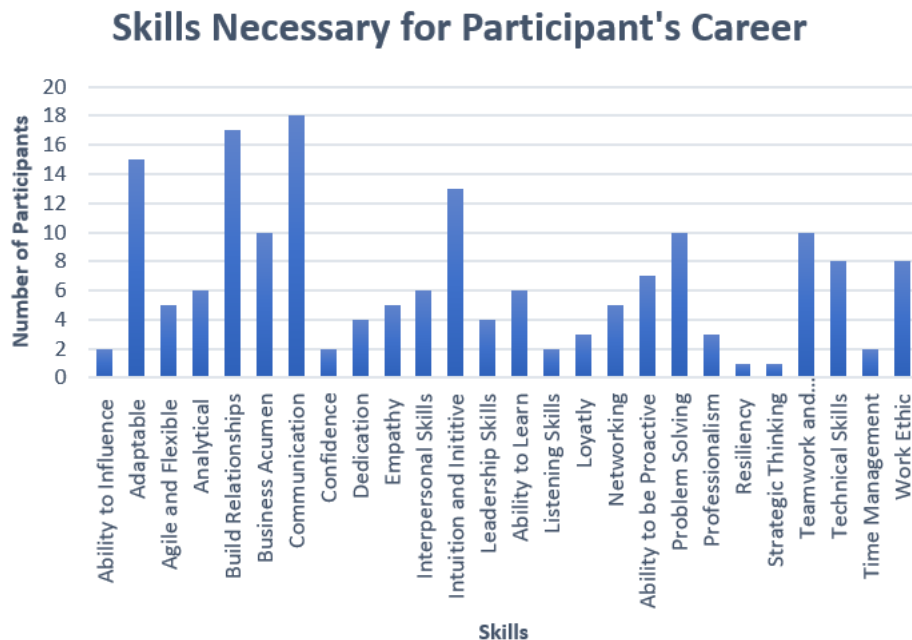
First, the interviewer asked the participants about the skills they felt most helpful in getting them to their current position. The interviewer posed the question this way to not lead them directly to the discussion of soft skills because the participant may not have felt that soft skills were useful. If the participant immediately began to discuss soft skills, the interviewer explained that this question was to address the skills in general. Because of the title of the dissertation, many of the participants immediately began to discuss soft skills. The researcher wanted to record general skills for this question; therefore, she redirected the participant. Though she redirected the participant, their initial responses were still recorded and accounted for in the coding. The question was open; thus, the responses varied by the participant. Some participants listed attributes rather than skills; however, their responses were still recorded.

Though it was not a direct answer to the question, four of the participants took the opportunity to discuss soft skills as it relates to African American women in corporate America. All four participants discussed the heightened need for African American women to have soft skills to be successful in corporate America. Two of the four participants explained that though there is a heightened need for African American women to possess soft skills, technical skills cannot be overlooked. The two participants said African American women must still know how to do their job and have technical skills. Additionally, three participants discussed that soft and technical skills worked in conjunction with one another. The skills listed by the majority of the participants were: communication, adaptability,

and building relationships. Ninety percent (n=18) of participants listed communication, eighty percent (n=17) listed building relationships, and seventy-five percent (n=15) listed adaptability. Figure 13 presents the skills the participants felt were necessary for them to achieve their current success.

Figure 13

Skills Necessary for Participant's Career



Based on the responses, the participants with more technical jobs listed more hard skills. Hard skills are more of the technical aspects of performing the job, which entails acquired knowledge (Page et al. 1993). These skills include technical abilities, factual knowledge, and specialized talents that one can develop through work experience, study, or practice (Wheeler, 2016). Six participants had technical jobs and discussed the need for their ability to perform the technical

aspects of the job using analytical skills and problem-solving. They were not as eager to mention the softer skills before they discussed the technical skills needed for the job. Although all six mentioned communication, teamwork, and collaboration, emphasis was placed on technical skills. The other fourteen were more eager to discuss soft skills such as communication, networking, and building relationships.

Utilization of General Skills

After the skills needed to get the participants to where they are today, the interviewer asked them how they utilized these skills along their journey. This question left room for the participant to discuss whatever skills they used along the journey. The answers ranged from the participant reiterating skills to some discussing each skill individually and how they utilized them. The interviewer had to ask follow-up questions when the participant only relisted the skills used. The interviewer would ask, “How did you utilize that skill?” or “How did that skill help you along your journey?”. These follow-up questions helped focus the responses.

Many participants share the same perspectives when discussing skills utilization, as shown in Figure 12 below. One of the participants used a quote to answer this question. She stated, “You get much farther in life being liked.” She used this quote to explain that she utilized empathy and self-awareness to ensure her peers liked her. She explained that this helps her contribute to her team and has helped her elevate along the way. Seventeen, which is eighty-five percent of the participants, stated that they utilized their skills to be personable and likable. They discussed how this has helped them elevate in their careers because they were easy

to get along with, and it helped them build relationships and networks. Some participants discussed that black women must be likable because of the stereotype of “angry black women.” They explained that often black women are seen as angry, so it is important for their peers to like them. These three participants mentioned that they have to overcome this stereotype by being overly likable and personable.

Many participants felt their voices were not heard as black women. Therefore, they believed that utilizing their soft and technical skills allowed their voices to be heard within their organization. Sixty percent (n=12) of the participants felt that the utilization of the skills that they possessed allowed for their voices to be heard. The soft skills they tied to this ability were communication, likability, building relationships, technical skills and abilities, adaptability, intuition, and confidence. Some participants also discussed the ability to add value to a team through collaboration. Seven participants discussed that their general skills allow them to contribute in a team environment with effective teamwork.

Seventy-five percent of the participants (n = 15) stated that their skills have allowed them to read the room. Reading the room is a colloquial term that refers to the ability to understand people's attitudes, thoughts, emotions, and stances in one's environment (Digital Cultures, 2021). To further explain, reading the room means analyzing one's environment and surroundings socially and psychologically and acting accordingly (Digital Cultures, 2021). The participants who discussed reading the room felt that their skills and abilities allowed them to adjust and adapt to their environment to be successful. They discussed the misconceptions that

accompany being a black woman and said that it is necessary to understand the environment because, at times, they must adjust so that they are received well. They explained that this means they may have to change their approach so that their ideas and talents are received, utilized, and appreciated by peers, leadership, and the organization. The participants' skills linked to this ability were communication, interpersonal skills, intuition, likeability, adaptability, agility, and a learning mindset.

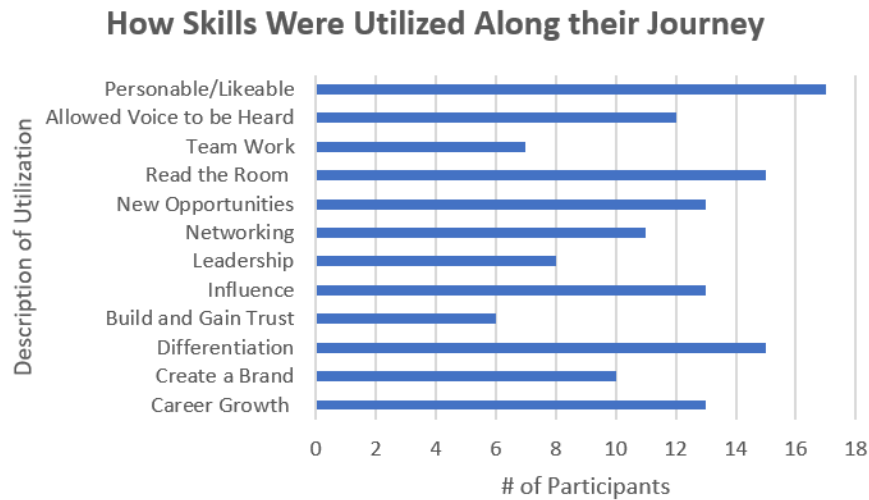
Most participants, sixty-five percent (n=13), stated that utilizing their skills allowed them to take advantage of new opportunities. The participants explained that using their skills allowed them to attain new jobs, projects, promotions, and exposure to other opportunities that helped elevate their careers. Participants explained that both soft and hard skills contributed to their ability to be exposed to new opportunities. The majority of the participants, fifty-five percent (n=11), also stated that using their soft skills helped with networking and building relationships. Five of those participants emphasized the importance of networking and building relationships in their careers. They attributed their success to the ability to network. The participants explained that soft skills help with networking and building relationships. They mentioned the specific skills of communication, interpersonal skills, and adaptability. Sixty-five percent of participants (n=13) said they could grow in their careers and create a brand using the skills mentioned in the opening question. Two participants discussed how self-awareness helped them create their brand, along with a learning mindset, adaptability, and business acumen. While ten

participants addressed creating a brand, fifteen participants, which includes these ten, stated that their soft skills have helped them differentiate themselves. The participants discussed how they used their skills to distinguish themselves from their peers so that they could stand out. Eight of these participants stated that their managers noticed them and chose them for leadership roles based on their ability to stand out.

Thirteen participants stated that they have been able to use their skills to influence. They indicated that their skills have allowed them to influence their business, managers, and peers. They explained that the ability to influence would enable them to lead without authority. The skills the participants listed that allowed them to influence were: communication, building trust, technical skills, and abilities, leadership skills, interpersonal skills, the ability to be proactive, problem-solving, and analytical skills. Some participants listed building trust as a skill; however, six participants (n=6) explained that their skills allowed them to build trust amongst their peers and organizational leadership. They explained that having a skill set that included soft and technical skills allowed their constituents to trust their work and abilities.

Figure 14

How Skills were Utilized Along their Journey



Definition of Soft Skills

The literature failed to provide a complete definition of the term soft skills; therefore, the interviewer asked the participants how they define soft skills. The participants provided a wide spectrum of meanings for soft skills. The interviewer recorded all statements made by each participant. Figure 13 presents all of the participants' definitions of soft skills. Most participants hesitated to define soft skills and stated that this was difficult to describe. The interviewer encouraged the participants to list skills that they felt were soft skills. Ninety percent of the participants (n=18) defined soft skills as interpersonal skills. They described these skills as people skills and the ability to form relationships and get along with people. Fifteen participants described soft skills as intangible skills, skills one cannot quantify. It was hard for the participants to elaborate on the term intangible,

but most of them described them as skills one has that allowed them to be successful. Sixteen participants explained that soft skills are non-technical, the opposite of soft skills. Three of those participants described soft skills as all non-technical skills that accompany technical skills. Eighty-five percent (n=17) of participants believe soft skills are intuitive and innate. Intuition means understanding one's environment and how one must adapt, make decisions, and interact with leaders and peers.

All the participants who believe that soft skills are intuitive and innate described soft skills as intangible. They believed that soft skills were those skills inside of individuals and are sometimes unexplainable. One participant commented, "it's just in you" and "you just have it, or you don't." Eight participants believed that soft skills were the skills that helped them navigate their careers in general. They stated that soft skills are the skills they used to get them to their career status today. Eight participants also said that soft skills are how one applies the skills they possess within their environment. They explained that it is the application of skills that an individual possesses. One of these participants stated that an individual might have a specific skill set but not know how to apply those skills in certain situations. The ability to use one's skill set when appropriate is a soft skill. Five participants explained that soft skills are situational. Individuals use these skills depending on the situation, person, and environment. The participants offered various definitions for soft skills based on their perspectives (see Figure 13). Based on the data collected regarding the definition of soft skills, the following themes

arose: soft skills are difficult to define, there is no universal definition of soft skills, and the list of soft skills is endless. Additional themes include: soft skills are innate and intuitive, interpersonal, intangible, and nontechnical skills.

Figure 15

Participant's Definition of Soft Skills

Adaptability	Agility and Flexibility	Application of Skills	Code Switching	Communication
Emotional Intelligence	Empathy	Fluid	How you show up/Read the Room	Innate Skills
Intangible Skills	Interpersonal Skills	Intuition	Listening Skills	Networking Skills
Non Technical Skills	Situational Skills	Skills necessary for Leadership	Relational Skills	Skills needed to Navigate Career

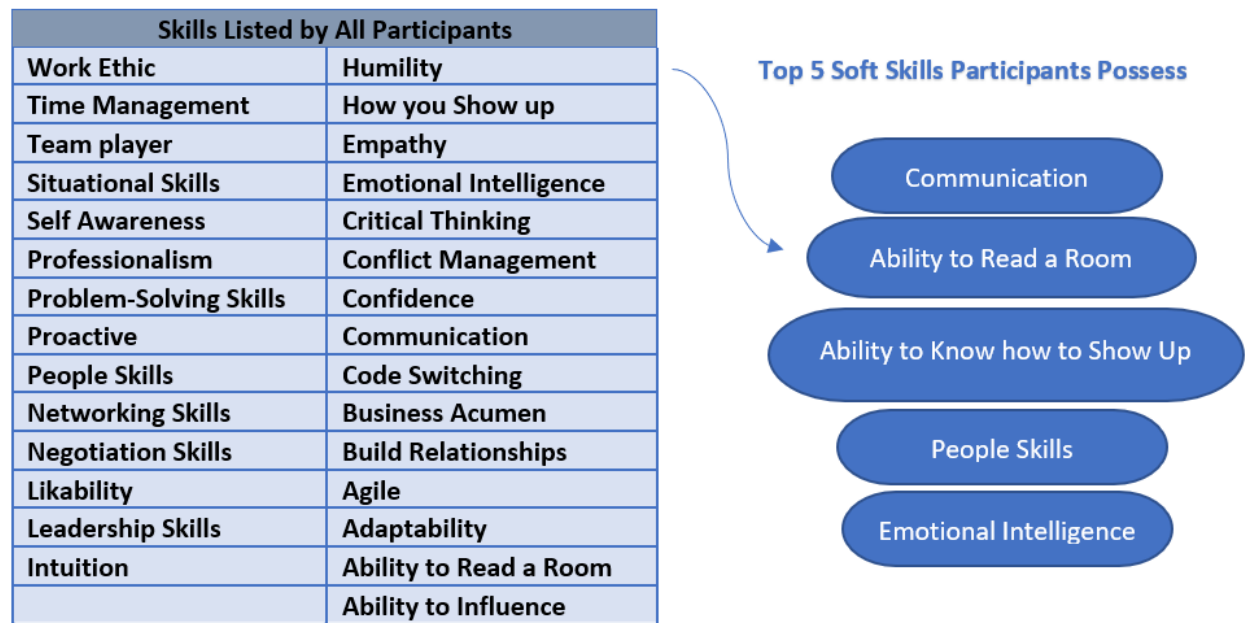
Participant's Soft Skills

The interviewer asked participants which soft skills they felt they possessed. The response to this question produced a plethora of different responses. The only skill listed by every participant was communication. A wide array of responses was similar to the definition of soft skills. Figure 14 lists all of the soft skills the participants feel they possess. Many of the skills can be grouped into one meaning. For the purpose of reporting all responses, the researcher provided a list of every response that the participants gave. The skills listed the most by the participants

were communication (n=20), ability to read a room (N = 10), ability to know how to show up (n=10), people skills (n=9), and emotional intelligence (n=8). The participants explained further explained that the ability to show up means an individual's presence, professionalism, likability, know-how, and ability to read the room and be flexible and adapt.

Figure 16

Participant's Soft Skills



Informal Attainment of Soft Skills

After the participants discussed the soft skills, they felt they possessed, the researcher asked how they learned them informally. The researcher explained that this question does not focus on formal training such as corporate or college training. The participants mainly discussed that soft skills came from their upbringing and how their parents raised them. Eighty percent of the participants

(n=16) discussed the fact that they attained soft skills from their upbringing. They explained that it came from lessons from their parents or guardians, the expectations their parents or guardians set for them, and what they observed from their parents. Seventy-five percent of participants (n=15) explained that their soft skills came from their environment. The participants described their environments as their schools, neighborhood, college, and workplaces. These environments enabled them to gain certain skills to flourish and survive. Ninety percent of participants (n=18) stated that their soft skills came from life experiences. Life experiences include interactions in their workplace, school, college, and extra-curricular organizations. The participants explained how, through their life experiences, they found that they must have certain skills or these interactions forced the development of these skills. Seventeen participants stated they developed soft skills by being black. They explained that as a black woman, you must have certain skills to succeed. These seventeen participants also discussed that black women must stand out with their skills and be better than their peers even to be noticed.

Formal Attainment of Soft Skills

After the informal attainment of soft skills discussion, the interviewer asked the participants about any soft skills training they may have received. Seven participants (n=7) had not received any soft skills training. Fifty percent (n=10) said they received soft skills training in college through their various degree programs. Seven of those fifty percent explained that their degree programs had specific soft

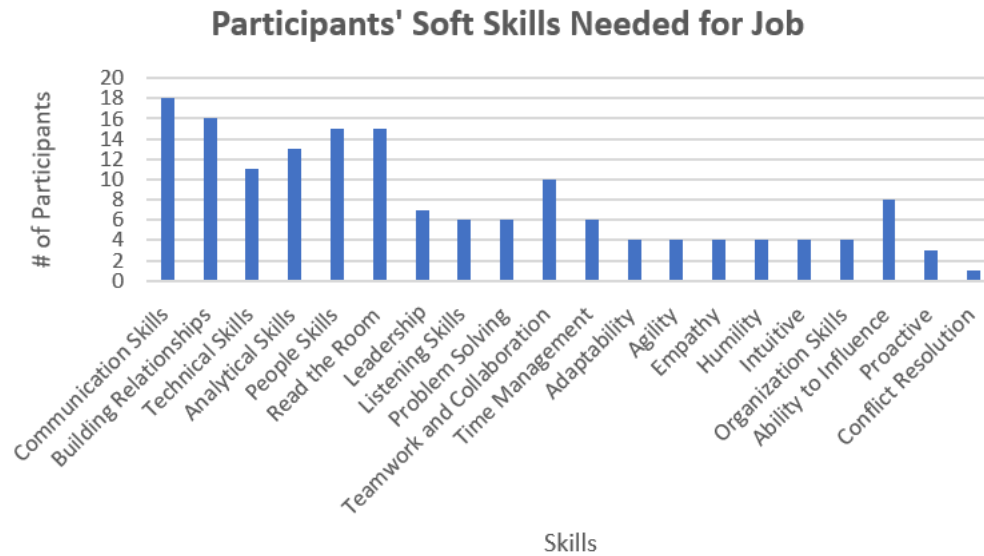
skills training to accompany their academic training. Twelve participants (n=12) received on-the-job soft skills training that included effective communication, leadership, diversity and inclusion, conflict management, strategic thinking, and teamwork and collaboration. Five participants (n=5) sought out training through various organizations. Six participants (n=6) received soft skills training within the community through organizations that offered training. Based on these results, themes emerged regarding the attainment of soft skills. Soft skills are innate and intuitive, and African American women attain soft skills from their upbringing and life experiences.

Participant's Skills Needed to Perform their Jobs

The participants began the interview with a discussion of soft skills and technical skills. They had the opportunity to define soft skills and discuss the soft and technical skills they felt possessed. When the participants were asked, what skills were needed to perform their organizational roles successfully, they all discussed the technical aspects of their jobs. They discussed technical skills such as data analytics, spreadsheets, analytical tools, project management, budgeting, and the review of documents. In addition to the technical skills, the participants listed soft skills that were also necessary for them to perform their jobs successfully. The top five soft skills listed by participants were communication skills, building relationships, analytical skills, people skills, and the ability to read the room. Figure 15 shows the participants' soft skills that they needed to perform their jobs successfully.

Figure 17

Participants' Soft Skills Necessary for Job



Participants' Utilization of Soft Skills

The participants were asked to explain how they utilized soft skills along their career journey. For the participants who were unclear about the question, the interviewer explained that they could discuss the purpose of soft skills, the application of soft skills, and situations where they needed soft skills along their journey. Some of the participants reiterated their responses to the question about utilizing general skills. The participants stated they utilize soft skills to advocate for themselves, build relationships and trust, gain opportunities, influence others, and read the room. Sixteen participants (n=16) stated that they used their soft skills to network upward and laterally, allowing them to build relationships and trust. They

explained that because of these relationships, they have been able to navigate through their career and often elevate. Fifteen participants (n=15) stated they had gained opportunities using soft skills. They explained that their soft skills allow them to stand out, be recognized, and differentiate themselves from their peers. In turn, this leads to career opportunities. Fifty percent of the participants (n=10) said that soft skills helped them influence others. These ten participants discussed the importance of the ability to influence in leadership positions. They felt that soft skills allowed them to gain the ability to influence without authority, which included influencing their peers and leaders when it came to business decisions and decisions about their careers. The skills that the participants stated helped them to influence were communication, likeability, adaptability, ability to read the room, ability to take the initiative, and intuition. Eight participants (n=8) discussed soft skills allowing them to read the room. Previously some participants listed the ability to read the room as a soft skill. The eight participants (n=8) explained that intuition, analytical skills, self-awareness, and adaptability allowed them to use their skills to read the room and adjust their behavior. Two participants (n=2) said they used their technical abilities more than soft skills along their journey. However, they both felt that the higher they elevate, the more they need soft skills.

Soft Skills and Climbing the Corporate Ladder

Based on the participants' definitions and list of soft skills, the interviewer asked each participant to describe the role soft skills played as they climbed the corporate ladder. This question provided various responses that gave insight into the participants' feelings about soft skills. Four participants (n=4) felt that soft

skills were not as important in more technical jobs. Those same four participants thought that the less technical the job, the more important soft skills were. They explained that when a job is more about one's ability to perform tasks, soft skills do not impact one's career advancement. They stated it is more about whether someone can complete the job or task. Six participants (n=6) felt differently and said that relationships must be built regardless of the job's technical. They explained that soft skills are needed to build relationships no matter how task-focused a career or position may be. Three participants (n=3) stated that you need soft skills to help translate the knowledge that you possess. They explained that a black woman must know how to do their job, but how to translate their abilities to others is accomplished by using soft skills.

Twenty percent (n=5) of participants felt that the higher you elevate, the more important soft skills become. They explained that individuals can lack soft skills until a certain level in their careers. According to these five participants, soft skills become more necessary once an individual becomes a leader and is responsible for making strategic decisions. While five participants (n=5) believe you only need soft skills the higher you elevate, fifteen participants (n=15) believed that soft skills are what helped them climb the corporate ladder. These fifteen participants stated they needed soft skills to build careers and gain leadership positions.

Eleven participants (n=11) felt soft skills were necessary for leadership. Six of these participants (n=6) were counted among the fifteen who believed that soft

skills help them climb the corporate ladder. These eleven participants explained that leaders must possess soft skills to lead effectively, and they must be able to display these skills before they attain a leadership role. These participants believed their career growth would have been stunted if they did not possess soft skills. Seventy percent of participants (n=14) explained that they needed soft skills to be successful in their careers at all levels. They felt that soft skills were necessary for their careers, not just in leadership or once they reached a certain level. Their responses differ from the thirteen participants who stated they needed soft skills to climb the corporate ladder. These fourteen participants' responses differed because they noted that the skills were necessary at any level, even if someone did not intend to climb the corporate ladder.

Eighty-five percent of participants (n=17) stated that soft skills allowed them to build relationships, connect, and engage with others. They explained that soft skills are the appropriate set of skills to give them the ability to build relationships with those who will help further their careers. The seventeen participants believed that the relationships they had built contributed to their ability to navigate their careers. Five of these participants offered specific examples of how individuals whom they met throughout their tenure were the individuals who presented them with new opportunities. Seven participants (n=7), which includes four of the seventeen participants, stated that soft skills help them network laterally and upward. Fifty percent of participants (n=10) believed that using soft skills helped their careers, exposing them to new opportunities. They explained that using

soft skills helped open doors to new opportunities because of relationships, likability, and the ability to display their technical and soft skills. This allowed them to move up the corporate ladder. Three participants related this back to the ability to translate their knowledge and skills.

Seven participants (n=7) stated that using soft skills contributes to how one shows up in the workplace. They explained how one shows up means an individual's presence, professionalism, likability, know-how, and ability to read the room and be flexible and adapt. The participants explained that this impacts how a person is received by their leadership and counterparts. This impact influences how far a person can go within a job or career. The seven participants explained that they have utilized soft skills to navigate their professional careers because how one shows up dramatically impacts them. Fifteen participants (n=15) mentioned using soft skills to differentiate themselves throughout their careers. They explained that they had to utilize soft skills to stand out because everyone on the job could perform. They explained that their soft skills helped them stand out above their peers. Fourteen of these participants added that they believed black women had to have an inflated use of soft skills to be successful. They discussed how black women are not afforded the same privileges as men and non-blacks. They elaborated on the topic and stated that black women had to bring more to the table than their counterparts. They stated they must be more competent, work harder, and have more skills than their peers. This series of questions led to themes such as African American women must utilize soft skills to become successful and could

not be successful without them. Another theme that emerged is that they use them to build relationships and differentiate themselves from their peers. As a dual minority, they must heighten their use to stand out amongst their peers to attain leadership because they must have more than technical skills. Essentially, getting the job done is not enough for African American women.

Top 10 Leadership Soft Skills

For the first part of the interview, the interviewer allowed the participants to discuss their views of soft skills from their personal definitions of soft skills. The second part of the interview focused on the Center for Creative Leadership's list of the top ten leadership soft skills see Figure 6. The participants were asked to focus their responses on the top ten. The interviewer presented the list of the top ten leadership soft skills along with the definitions and asked the participants which of the soft skills on the list they possess. Sixty-five percent (n=13) of the participants stated that they possessed all of the soft skills on the Center for Creative Leadership's list. All participants identified as top-level leaders stated they possessed all ten soft leadership skills. They explained that every soft skill on this list is mandatory to get to their level. They would not be in leadership if they did not have these skills. They also explained that an individual does not need all these skills all the time; however, they show up at pertinent times. One of the participants stated, "You have to know when and how to flex each skill."

Two participants (n=2) stated that they do not possess emotional intelligence. One of those participants explained that she believed emotions at work should not affect people. She expressed that she is learning that it is essential to

leadership, but she has not mastered those abilities at work. She feels that the farther one goes in their career, the more emotionally intelligent one should be. She stated that it is a work in progress for her. The other participant explained that she had not emphasized the skill of emotional intelligence throughout her career. She stated that she guessed she never saw a need for it. For her, she believes work and emotions should be separate. She shared that after seeing emotional intelligence on the list, she can see how she may need to pay more attention to developing soft skills in her leadership. One participant stated that she lacked excellent communication skills. She explained that she can communicate; however, this is a skill that she feels needs improvement. She stated that this is why she said she does not possess communication skills. She feels she does the bare minimum with communication on her job.

Top 10 Leadership Soft Skills Impact on Current Role

The researcher next asked the participants to list and discuss the top ten leadership soft skills that tie to their ability to perform their current roles within their companies. Figure 15 lists the skills that the participants use in their current role. Four participants (n=4) stated they needed all of the top ten leadership soft skills to succeed in their roles. They explained that they all play their role in their ability to perform their jobs. Eighty percent (n=16) of the participants stated that communication was a skill that was necessary for their current role. These participants expressed that communication was essential to their job productivity. They stated that effective communication was needed in all aspects of their job, from leading teams to connecting with leadership and customers. Sixty-five percent

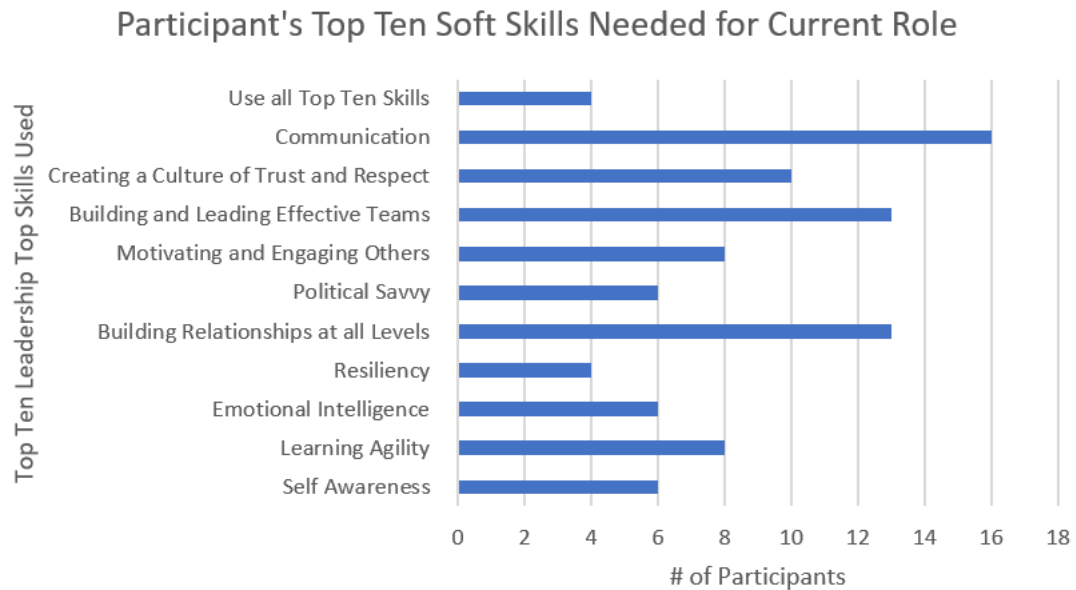
(n=13) of participants stated that building relationships at all levels were essential to their current role. Most of these participants mentioned that relationships with subordinates were just as meaningful as relationships with higher-ups. They discussed that relationships help one lead and influence their team to achieve a common goal. All four participants that were in sales stated that relationships were meaningful within the company and with clients. They stated that the success of their business depends on relationships. Eleven participants (n=11) stated that the skill of building and leading effective teams was essential to their success in their current role. All eleven mentioned that it is their responsibility to build their teams, and the success of their teams depends on their leadership. Three of these participants discussed the importance of mentoring those on their team to ensure they can get the best productivity out of their team members. Fifty percent (n=10) stated that creating a culture of trust and respect affects their current role. They all discussed the importance as it relates to the ability to build relationships and effective teams. They discussed that creating trust and respect plays a role in the ability to influence subordinates and higher-ups. They felt that as leaders, their ability to be effective depends on their people, and their people must trust and respect them. One participant discussed how she feels more productive when her subordinates and those above her trust and respect her. She feels that she can be more innovative and creative. Forty percent of participants (n=8) stated that motivating and engaging others and learning agility were essential to their roles. Those that spoke about motivating and engaging others mentioned that these were

vital abilities needed to lead others. They mentioned that if a team is not motivated, it will not be effective, which ties to building and leading effective teams. All eight of these participants stated that building and leading effective teams, creating a culture of trust and respect, and motivating and engaging others are skills that work together for effective leadership. They felt that they would not be successful leaders without these abilities. They stated that getting a group to work towards a common goal is often difficult, which is why these skills are essential to leadership.

For the remainder of the top ten leadership soft skills listed, thirty percent or less listed them as soft skills needed for their current role. Six participants (n=6) listed self-awareness as a skill that impacted their current role. The participants that mentioned self-awareness expressed how it is an ongoing skill that must be used throughout their careers. They explained that they must always read the room and be aware of their surroundings to avoid offending others or missteps. Six participants also mentioned political savvy. The same six (n=6) who listed self-awareness stated that political savvy is an impactful skill in their current role. They discussed how it is essential to be aware of the politics within the office. They explained that this is about reading the room and environment. It is necessary to be received as a leader by subordinates and the organization's leaders. Four participants (n=4) stated they had used resiliency daily throughout their careers. They discussed the importance of resiliency every day in their current roles. They explained that they face adversity on their jobs and that they need resiliency to overcome adversity on the job.

Figure 18

Top Ten Leadership Soft Skills Essential to Current Role



Top Ten Soft Skills and Organizational Value

The interviewer next asked the participants whether these top ten soft leadership skills helped them add value to their organization and, if so, how. Two of the participants whose positions are highly technical stated that all of the top ten leadership soft skills go hand-in-hand with their technical skills. They stated that they add value to their organizations because of the top ten soft leadership skills. One participant stated that she might do her job excellently; however, it may not affect the business if she could not articulate or express her contributions. She mentioned that this ability comes through soft skills such as communication, building relationships, creating a culture of trust and respect, and sometimes political savvy. Ninety-five percent of the participants (n=19) stated that their

communication skills add value to their organization. The participants stated that effective communication is a significant part of their jobs. The mentioned oral and written effective communication impacts whether they do their jobs successfully. All the participants (n=4) in sales stated that the success or failure of their jobs depends on effective communication.

Eighty percent of participants (n=16) stated that their ability to build and lead effective teams adds value to their organization. They further explained that their teams are a reflection of their leadership. Their team must be productive in order to support the business. They discussed how their other soft skills allow them the ability to build and lead effective teams. The participants mentioned communication, emotional intelligence, creating trust and respect, self-awareness, and motivating and engaging others. The researcher reported the number of participants who listed these skills with the individual skill. Many participants explained that specific leadership skills are involved in leading effective teams. Fifty percent of participants (n=10) discussed the ability to influence as a leadership skill that impacts the ability to lead an effective team. Three participants (n=3) described leadership as the ability to lead without authority. They further explained that the team would work hard, complete tasks, and add value to the organization if a leader could influence them.

Fifteen participants (75%), who are counted in the participants who listed building and leading effective teams, stated that the ability to create a culture of trust and respect allows them to add value to the organization. They discussed

creating a culture of trust and respect as a skill that accompanies building and leading effective teams. They also discussed that when those higher on the corporate ladder than them respect them, they are receptive to their ideas and suggestions in the workspace. They further explained that with a culture of trust and respect, it is easier to add value to an organization with new ideas. The participants explained that this culture allows them to express new ideas, strategies, and decisions that impact the business. Sixteen participants (80%) stated that learning agility allows them to add value because they are open to learning. The participants explained that learning is essential because they must be open to learning from mistakes and feedback. They stated that they learn from their experiences and adjust their actions based on the lessons along their journey. They mentioned that their openness to learning adds value to the organization because they can contribute what they learn. When they need to learn something new, they are willing to seek ways to learn. The participants stated that the willingness to learn allows them to contribute continuously to the organization.

Eighty-five percent of the participants (n=17) mentioned that the ability to build relationships at all levels allowed them to contribute to their organization. They stated that they could accomplish work success through the relationships they have established. The participants gave examples of using relationships to add value to the organization. Three participants mentioned that it is easier to communicate laterally and upward in an organization with established relationships. They explained that when colleagues know an individual, they are

more open to new initiatives, ideas, and opinions about the business. One individual explained how she used her relationships with higher-ups to communicate new ideas about restructuring her division. She explained they were receptive to her presentation and bought into the new ideas. Another individual spoke about using her relationships to get the decision-makers to agree to her team working one hundred percent remotely. All the examples were about their ability to communicate business initiatives to those in leadership positions and obtain their buy-in. Fourteen participants (70%) discussed the importance of political savvy. They stated that political savvy allows them to add value to the organization through their ability to read the room and situations in their strategic decision-making. They connected this ability to relationships and dealing with those inside the company and customers. They explain that this ability helps them connect with customers and other stakeholders. Fifteen participants (n=15) also mentioned resilience. They stated that it allows them to continue to lead their team in the face of adversity. They elaborated that resiliency allows them to excel in their jobs which benefits the organization by pushing through challenging projects or job tasks. Resiliency helps them perform effectively in their roles despite any adversity, whether from colleagues or with job tasks. Half of the participants (n=10) stated that their ability to motivate and engage allows them to add value to the organization. They explained that they must encourage their team in order to achieve productivity. The participants added that this is necessary for leadership because their team's success depends on their leadership. They discussed

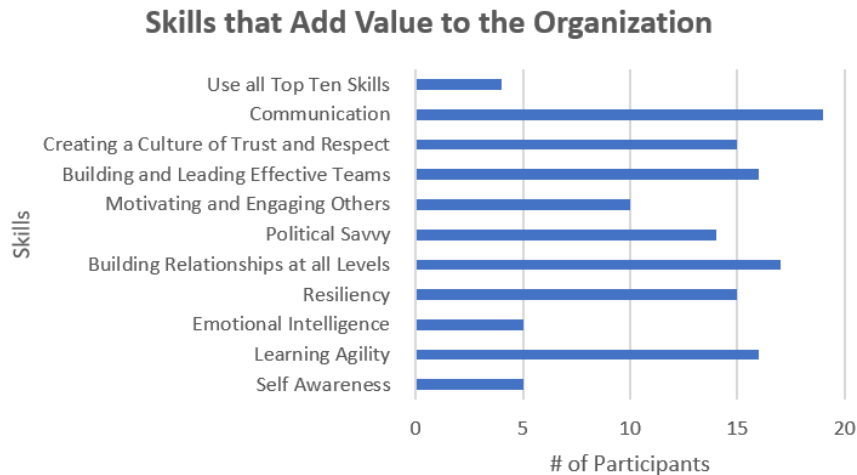
employees lacking motivation and how this affects the team. When team members lack motivation and engagement, they must find ways to engage and motivate those employees. One participant stated that firing an unmotivated employee is not always the answer because they have skills and knowledge that one can bring out of them. The leader must motivate and engage those employees so that they will be effective and productive.

Twenty percent of the participants (n=5) mentioned self-awareness and emotional intelligence. The participants stated that self-awareness is vital because it helps them become aware of improvements that they need to make. These improvements help the business and help them perform their job better. One participant stated that self-awareness lets her know how others perceive her within her role. Based on these perceptions, she stated that she could understand certain behaviors impacting her job. For example, if others do not respect her voice or opinions, she uses self-awareness to understand. She stated that she could adjust how she interacts to get her job done. Another participant stated that self-awareness is a skill that helps her understand how her actions affect others. She explained that this skill had helped her organization through her leadership. The participants who mentioned emotional intelligence said it added to their leadership abilities when leading others. They discussed that they must understand the team and their attitudes and emotions to maximize productivity. Under the category of organizational value, a theme emerged that African American women utilized soft

skills along their career journeys; however, those skills also add value to the organization.

Figure 19

Participant's Skills that Add Value to the Organization



Impact of Top 10 Soft Leadership Skills on Effective Leadership

One participant answered with one statement: "When the team wins, I win. When we win, I believe I have succeeded in being an effective leader. When others are willing to go "with you, " success will follow." Three participants (n=3) stated that all ten leadership soft skills impact their ability to be effective leaders. The participants explained that an effective leader needs all ten skills at different times throughout leadership. They further described that one must know when to utilize these skills for effective leadership. Each of the top ten soft leadership skills shows up at different times when needed. For instance, leaders need emotional intelligence to understand subordinates and get the most productivity from the

worker. Some participants discussed the need for building relationships, creating a culture of trust and respect, and motivating and engaging others. They described that these skills work hand-in-hand and are essential for leading effective teams to one common goal. Eighteen participants (n=18) stated that effective communication impacts their leadership ability. Communication is vital in directing teams to complete tasks and assignments. They stated that one must be able to communicate goals, ideas, and strategies to their team. The participants explained that it is essential to know how one's messages come across to the team members, so messages and the communication style should be effective.

Fifteen participants (n=15) listed creating a culture of trust and respect as the skill that impacts their ability to be influential leaders. Two participants explained that creating a culture of trust and respect allows a leader to influence their subordinates. One participant stated that if one's team trusts and believes in the leader's vision, they will run through a brick wall for that leader. This participant's sentiment explained what all participants expressed about the impact of creating a culture of trust and respect. They must trust and believe in the leader to get a team to work toward one common goal. Seventy percent (n=14) discussed building relationships at all levels and motivating and engaging others as skills needed for effective leadership. All these participants also included creating a culture of trust and respect in their list. The participants expressed that building relationships at all levels allows one to connect with others, and effective leaders must connect with their teams. They explained that this goes hand-in-hand with

creating a culture of trust and respect and motivating and engaging others. All these skills work together to shape an effective leader. The participants spoke of the other skills: emotional intelligence, self-awareness, and political savvy as if these skills were ancillary. Relating soft skills to effective leadership, a theme developed that all of the top ten soft leadership skills impact an African American women's ability to become an effective leader. However, all top ten skills are not utilized all the time, they must know when to utilize a particular skill.

Role of the Top Ten Soft Leadership Skills

In the first half of the interview, the researcher asked the participant about the role of soft skills in their careers. This question was about their definition of soft skills. The interviewer then asked the participants to discuss the role of the top ten soft leadership skills throughout their corporate journey. All participants stated that the top ten leadership skills played an essential role in their ability to be successful. Eighty-five percent of the participants (n=17) stated they needed all ten leadership soft skills for success. They said that all ten were necessary for their success. They explained that throughout their career, each of these skills had impacted their ability to be successful, whether over a task, a job, or their career in general. They explained that all the skills do not show up at once but are needed at different times. Fifteen participants (n=15) explained that all ten of the soft leadership skills were critical in their ability to ascend in their careers. All these participants discussed the need to build relationships at all levels. They felt that without these relationships, they would not have been able to climb the ladder. These participants spoke about building relationships with mentors and sponsors.

Some of them explained that one needs to have relationships with people who will speak on one's behalf when not in the room, which is essential for ascension. They also explained that hard work is not enough and that relationships can help someone take their career far. Half of the participants (n=10) stated that resiliency significantly impacted their ability to climb the corporate ladder. They explained that black women face much adversity on the job, and resiliency is vital to bouncing back and moving beyond it.

Sixteen participants (n=16) stated that, as black women, they would not be successful without the top ten leadership soft skills. They explained that these skills are an advantage for African American women in corporate America because black women are not afforded the same privilege as others. They explained that black women must utilize these top ten leadership soft skills more than their counterparts. The participants stated that this gives them a competitive advantage. Three participants (n=3) stated that the less technical a job is, the more an individual needs the top soft leadership skills to climb the corporate ladder. Four participants (n=4) said using the top ten soft leadership skills allowed them access to new opportunities that elevated their careers. They explained that all ten soft leadership skills worked together at certain times to give them access to new opportunities. The role of the top ten leadership soft skills theme that arose is that African American women could not have attained leadership and success without utilizing the top ten leadership soft skills as they were critical in their ability to ascend.

Utilization of Top Ten Leadership Soft Skills

The participants discussed how each of the top ten leadership skills showed up at different times throughout their careers. Participants stated that they utilized the skill of building and leading effective teams when leading a group of people to one common goal was necessary. They described this skill as necessary because they stated that their success depends on the team's success. A majority of the participants described building and leading effective teams (n=16), motivating and engaging others (n=10), and creating a culture of trust and respect (n=15) as skills that worked together that allowed them to lead their teams effectively. The participants stated that the skill of building relationships at all levels allowed them to gain mentors, gain sponsors, and connect with subordinates. Fifty percent of participants (n=10) discussed the importance of building relationships and networking to gain sponsors. They described sponsors as those who will advocate for one in their absence. They explained that sponsors must be from diverse backgrounds, and three participants stated that sponsors should be white males. They stated that white males have power in most organizations, and they can utilize this power to advocate. Two participants gave a specific example of how a sponsor spoke up for them to give them the leadership position they are in today. The participants stated that, as leaders, emotional intelligence is needed to understand the people on their teams, which helps motivate and encourage them.

Nineteen participants (n=19) spoke about using written and oral communication skills. They stated that effective communication is essential for their success and daily job activities. The participants discussed learning agility as

it relates to learning from their experiences and adjusting their behavior based on the lessons learned. They also discussed being willing to learn to improve their work effectiveness. They stated they utilized their willingness to learn when receiving feedback and making corrections. Ten participants (n=10) discussed resiliency as a skill utilized throughout life and has been impactful throughout their careers. Many participants spoke of obstacles and challenges, such as stereotypes and diversity, and how they used resiliency to overcome this adversity. The participants spoke about political savvy as a skill used to read the room and understand office politics requiring maneuvering. They stated that political savvy has allowed them to avoid certain office political challenges.

Barriers to Corporate Leadership

The researcher asked the participants to describe the type of barriers that they have experienced along their corporate journey. Eighty percent of the participants (n=16) stated that their barriers were discrimination, misconceptions, pre-judgments, and unconscious bias. They explained that being a double minority hinders much progress in their careers. They further discussed how they are often treated differently because of their race and gender. Fifteen of these participants (n=15) stated that being a black woman, in general, is a barrier, while twelve (n=12) stated that being different is a barrier. Half of these participants (n=8) stated that this often causes leadership to overlook them and not allow their voices to be heard. Another eight participants also stated that one of the barriers to leadership is a lack of resources, exposure, and opportunities. They explained that first-generation college graduates are not exposed to the same resources as those whose

whole family has a college degree. They elaborated that these resources allow others opportunities that would otherwise hinder them. They also explain that this deals with how they were raised, their upbringing, and their parents' resources. The participants expressed that being raised in underprivileged and under-resourced communities does not allow individuals the same opportunities. One participant stated. "If you can't see it, you can't be it." She meant that if someone is not exposed to specific careers or successes, it would be difficult for that person to achieve success. Many participants expressed similar sentiments about the lack of resources, exposure, and opportunities.

Sixty percent of the participants (n=12) discussed lack of relationships and networks as a barrier to corporate leadership. The participants felt that relationships and networks are critical in their ability to ascend; without these resources, it is impossible to move up. Some explained that even when a black woman works twice as hard, the hard work will not help them ascend unless she has established relationships. They explained that working hard in a silo will not get anyone anywhere in corporate America. Four participants (n=4) stated that a lack of mentors and sponsors had been a barrier in their careers. They discussed that mentors could provide career guidance and that sponsors can propel their careers. They explained that it becomes difficult to elevate their careers without mentors and sponsors because it is necessary to have those in leadership that will speak on their behalf as advocates. They elaborated that in the workplace, hard work does

not necessarily stand out; therefore, one must have an advocate who speaks out about an individual's hard work.

Seven (n=7) of the sixteen participants who discussed discrimination stated that black women must work twice as hard. They explained that this is a barrier to corporate leadership because they feel that their skills are not recognized unless they give twice the effort of their counterparts. They stated they must have more credentials, skills, knowledge, and abilities for leadership consideration. Some stated that they must be more polite, professional, and considerate for acceptance in their workplaces. Six (n=6) of these seven participants related these feelings to imposter syndrome. The participants explained that imposter syndrome means feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt and that they do not belong. They explained that this impacts their confidence and ability to perform often. Two participants (n=2) described the lack of understanding of office politics as a barrier. One of those participants explained that they had to leave an organization because she could not understand the inner workings of the relationships within her old company. The other participant said she would probably never move further than her current level because she does not "play office politics." She said she hates it and refuses to because she believes her hard work should pay off. Twelve participants (n=12) mentioned the organization itself as a barrier to corporate leadership. Many participants mentioned that some organizations' culture does not allow black women to elevate to leadership positions. They further explained that some organizations are just not ready for change. Others discussed that office

politics sometimes would not allow a black female leader. The barriers to leadership category presented several themes, including barriers of discrimination, misconceptions, pre-judgments, and unconscious bias, the organization itself, lack of opportunities, resources, and exposure. An additional theme is that the dual minority status of an African American woman is a barrier to leadership in itself.

Figure 20

Barriers to Corporate Leadership



Experience Utilizing Soft Skills to Navigate Barriers

The researcher asked the participants to describe how they have utilized soft skills in general to navigate barriers. This question did not focus on the top ten soft leadership skill. Twelve participants (n=12) felt that black women must overly utilize soft skills. One participant described it as hyperactivating all soft skills. They explained that they must overly utilize all soft skills, including communication, networking skills, intuition, reading the room, and general professionalism. They stated that this ties into the fact that black women must work

twice as hard or be better than their counterparts. Eighty percent of the participants stated that building relationships and networks have helped them navigate barriers along their journey. They explained that when the barrier is discrimination or lack of resources, the relationships help black women overcome those stereotypes of lack of resources. Most of the eighty percent stated that diverse relationships help navigate barriers because when others outside of their race trust them and their work, they can advocate on their behalf. They explained that relationships also help expose them to opportunities and resources they may not have access to without the help of others.

Ninety percent of the participants (n=18) stated that communication helps them navigate barriers. Some participants stated that confronting the barriers head-on by calling them out has worked for them. They stated that they are often vocal about what they have experienced when they recognize the barrier. Others stated that they express themselves to their counterparts when encountering microaggressions or stereotypes. Some explained that effective communication helps them express ideas or innovations that help the business. Therefore, when their counterparts realize they are competent, they become more receptive to them. They explained how communication helps build relationships and networks. One participant stated, "Closed mouths do not get fed." They summed up the meaning of what most of the participants stated. To further explain, they discussed how adding their opinions and thoughts in conversations in certain rooms is necessary because it is easy for others to overlook their opinions and thoughts.

Sixteen participants (n=16) mentioned resiliency or overcoming adversity as a skill they have utilized to navigate barriers in corporate America. Several participants shared stories of how they have had to be resilient throughout their careers because of the discrimination and stereotypes they have encountered. The majority stated that resiliency is often innate in black women because they must be resilient to succeed as a double minority. They also spoke about when they experience failure on job-specific tasks; they utilize resiliency to bounce back with new strategies. Fifteen participants (n=15) discussed that they had had to utilize the ability to read the room. They explained that black women must be aware of how they show up in the room, meaning others' perceptions of them and how others receive them because they must adapt. They must adapt to situations to make the best impression on their counterparts, allowing their colleagues to see them in a favorable manner that will benefit their careers. They discussed how reading the room allows them to recognize and understand biases and misconceptions that may be present when dealing with colleagues. They further explained that this understanding enables them to utilize soft skills to overcome biases or misconceptions. Fourteen participants (n=14) stated that creating trust is a skill that has helped them navigate barriers. They elaborated on how trust helps overcome stereotypes or misconceptions others may have of black women. The participants explained that once constituents get to know them and their skills and abilities, they begin to trust them, allowing them to form relationships. Relationships and trust help overcome barriers.

Fifty percent of the participants (n=10) stated adaptability was necessary to navigate barriers. They utilized adaptability on job tasks as well as throughout their careers. Adaptability was a skill used when reading the room; they needed to adjust their responses to different situations. They also explain that adaptability allowed others to accept them in environments that would not usually accept them because they were black women. Two participants described this as code-switching. The participants explained that they must adapt how they interact with their colleagues depending on whom and when they interact. Sometimes this means changing voice, dialect, and tone when speaking where they do not speak in the same manner they would outside the workplace. Another fifty percent of the participants (n=10) also stated that they confront barriers utilizing other soft skills such as communication. They stated it is better to inform colleagues that they recognize the barrier and will not allow it to impact them. Some explained that it is better to be open about the barriers because sometimes colleagues are unaware of their behavior and its effect. The participants gave examples of calling out microaggressions, misconceptions, and biases in the workplace.

After the participants discussed their use of soft skills, the researcher asked them to discuss the top leadership soft skills that were most helpful in navigating barriers to corporate leadership. The participants discussed many of the top ten leadership soft skills in their initial discussion of navigating barriers. In addition to the data reported above, the participants discussed additional top ten leadership soft skills. Thirteen participants (n=13) discussed using political savvy as a skill to

overcome barriers. The participants who identified political savvy were those who explained the importance of reading the room. They explained that they used the skill of political savvy to network and read the room, which helps with networking and forming relationships. Seven participants (n=7) mentioned that emotional intelligence has helped them navigate barriers because they used this skill to understand people. They elaborated that when someone has biases or uses microaggressions, they can use empathy to understand that person. They explained that this helps them network and form work relationships that benefit them and their careers. Five participants (n=5) stated they used self-awareness and learning agility. They explained that self-awareness allows them to accept feedback, make adjustments based on it, and help with emotional intelligence. They can understand others by understanding their weaknesses and strengths. Regarding learning agility, they stated that they are willing to learn when a barrier may be a lack of exposure or opportunities. Only two participants stated that they use the skill of managing and engaging others, and zero participants stated that they utilize building and leading effective teams. Here, a theme arose that African American women can utilize the top ten leadership soft skills to navigate the barriers they face to corporate leadership successfully. Each skill listed allows African Americans to utilize them throughout their careers to overcome various barriers.

Figure 21

Soft Skills Utilized to Navigate Barriers to Corporate Leadership

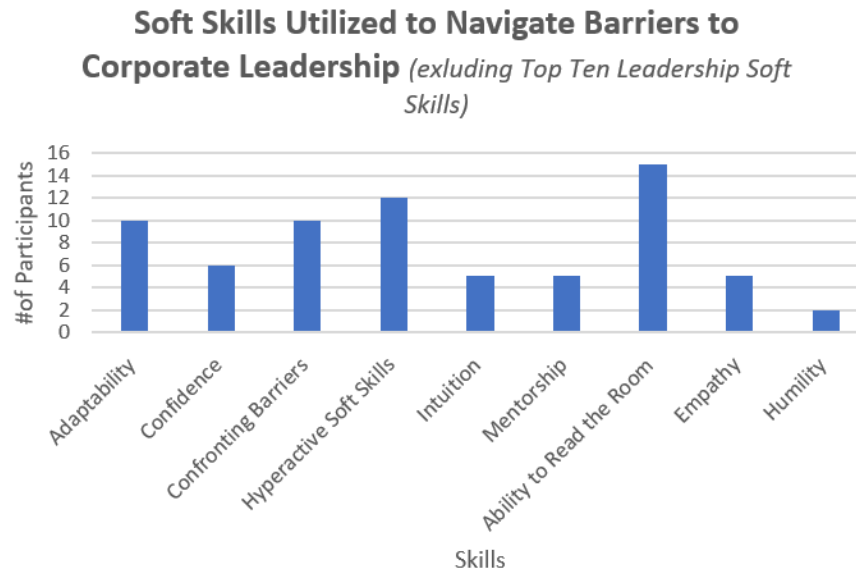


Figure 22

Top Ten Leadership Soft Skills Most Helpful in Navigating Barriers to Corporate Leadership



Summary

The analysis of the data collected from the interviews of twenty African American women produced common themes that address the phenomenon of the lack of African American women in corporate America. The twenty participants participated in two interviews and reviewed the transcripts for member-checking. The results of the phenomenological study revealed common perspectives among the African American women participants. The overall research question of the study explored the role of soft skills in African American women's ascension to corporate leadership. The sub-research question explored the role of soft skills in African American women's ability to navigate barriers to corporate leadership.

The interview questions that targeted the first research question regarding the role of soft skills in African American women's ability to ascend to corporate leadership generated several themes. The findings reveal that there is no universal meaning of the term soft skills. Additionally, soft skill is a term that is difficult for individuals to define. It also shows that the list of soft skills is endless. The participants offered an array of definitions for what they believe are soft skills (see Figure 13). The themes from this series of questioning include: soft skills are difficult to define, soft skills are innate and intuitive, interpersonal, intangible, and nontechnical skills. These skills cannot be taught because they are innate and come from experiences. Additionally, African American women have unique experiences that help them develop unique skills. Many of these skills that the participants identified as necessary skills to ascend to leadership are considered soft skills (see Figure 14) and align with the top ten soft leadership skills by the Center

for Creative Leadership (see Figure 6). The top five skills that participants listed as essential for African American women (see Figure 14) align precisely with emotional intelligence, political savvy, communication, and building relationships.

The findings revealed that African American women would not be successful without using soft skills, including all ten leadership soft skills. African American women's ascension to leadership would be hindered without the use of soft skills. The findings further revealed that African American women must heighten soft skills and use them more than their counterparts along their corporate journey to obtain leadership roles. African American women must utilize soft skills to differentiate themselves, stand out, and allow their voices to be heard, which affords them a competitive advantage. The competitive advantage positions them for leadership roles. The findings also show that building relationships are critical for African American women's ascension in leadership roles because hard work is not enough. African American women must leverage relationships such as mentors and sponsors to benefit from their hard work and technical skills.

The findings indicate that African American women utilize specific soft skills to navigate barriers to corporate leadership. The participants shared the same perspective regarding barriers to corporate leadership. The findings include the following barriers to corporate leadership for African American women: discrimination, misconceptions, stereotypes, microaggressions, prejudgments, unconscious bias, lack of relationships or networks, the state of being a black woman, lack of resources, opportunities, and exposure, and the organization itself.

African American women heighten their use of soft skills in order to navigate the barriers that they face. They utilize soft skills as generally defined, but the study narrowed the use of the top ten leadership soft skills by the Center for Creative Leadership. African American women lean heavily on communication skills when navigating barriers. The top ten soft leadership skills that African American women utilize most in navigating barriers include communication, building relationship at all levels, creating a culture of trust and respect, resiliency, and political savvy.

The study found that communication helps African American women overcome stereotypes, misconceptions, and discrimination when informing constituents of these barriers by professionally confronting them. African American women found that bringing attention to these types of barriers has been successful in their ability to overcome the barriers. They also utilize communication skills to network and form mutually beneficial relationships where these relationships open up opportunities and expose them to resources that they previously lacked access. Resiliency is vital in the African American's ability to ascend to leadership and navigate barriers. They must be able to bounce back from all the discrimination, misconceptions, stereotypes, and microaggressions and excel in the job despite these challenges. Resiliency plays a crucial role in how they move through corporate America. Resiliency allows them to push past challenges and build relationships with their colleagues.

Based on the results, African American women utilize the skill of building relationships at all levels when the barriers include discrimination, stereotypes,

misconceptions, or lack of resources. They utilize relationships with colleagues who are not minorities, and through these relationships, African American women can discredit the stereotypes, misconceptions, and discrimination. In turn, they can create trust with their colleagues. These relationships help African American women because others can advocate on their behalf while they build trust and respect with their colleagues. Mutually beneficial relationships break down barriers for African American women and allow for their skills and abilities to stand out versus the hindrance of the barriers. African American women's skill of building relationships at all levels and creating a culture of trust and respect work together to overcome barriers. When the barrier is a lack of resources, exposure, or opportunities, African American women leverage these relationships to gain access to resources, opportunities, and exposure. African American women must also utilize the skill of building relationships with subordinates, allowing them to effectively lead their team because trust and respect have been established. African American women utilize political savvy when navigating office politics, often including microaggression, misconceptions, unconscious bias, and discrimination. African American women utilize their political savvy skills to influence people, read the situation, and adjust in a way that allows them to achieve favorable outcomes.

The findings further revealed that while African American women utilize soft skills and precisely the top ten soft leadership skills to navigate barriers, those

skills benefit the organization, allowing them to be effective leaders. In sum, the findings of this study revealed the following:

- Some African American women's soft skills are innate, and others come from their upbringing and experiences as black women.
- African American women would not achieve corporate leadership without using soft skills, including all ten leadership soft skills.
- African American women must heighten soft skills and use them more than their counterparts to differentiate themselves along their corporate journey to obtain leadership roles.
- African American women heighten their use of soft skills in order to navigate the barriers that they face.
- African American women in corporate America must hyperactivate soft skills and leverage relationships to ascend to leadership roles, meaning they ensure their soft skills are extraordinarily active and utilized.
- The soft skills that African American women utilize to navigate barriers are the same skills that allow them to add value to their organizations through their leadership.

Contribution to Applied Practice

The human capital theory was applied to this phenomenological study to explore the role of African American women's soft skills. Based on human capital theory, organizations are not taking advantage of the human capital brought

to an organization by African American women leaders (Becker, 1964). The researcher utilized research trustworthiness and data credibility, such as triangulation and member checking to ensure the validity of the findings. The participants participated in an initial interview, a follow-up interview, and a review of the interview transcripts for member checking. Triangulation of data was met by member checking, participants sharing perspectives, and transcript review. The analysis of the data collected from the interviews of twenty African-American women produced common themes that address the phenomenon of the lack of African American women in corporate America. The results of the phenomenological study revealed common perspectives among the African American women participants. The overall research question of the study explored the role of soft skills in African American women's ascension to corporate leadership. The sub-research question explored the role of soft skills in African American women's ability to navigate barriers to corporate leadership. The interview questions were aligned with the overall research questions to generate common themes that addressed the research questions.

The theory applied to this study was the human capital theory (Becker, 1964). Based on human capital theory, African American women bring skills, abilities, talents, and experiences to organizations that can serve as human capital resources when leading to organizational outcomes (DeLany & Rogers, 2004; Ployhart & Moliterno, 2011; Sims & Carter, 2019). This study's findings reveal that African American women's soft skills, including the top ten leadership soft skills,

are part of an African American woman's overall KSAOs, which adds value to the organization. These findings raise awareness of the impact of African American women's soft skills and how they bring value to the organization. Therefore, leaders of the organization can cultivate and take advantage of these skills in African American women to benefit the company. As organizations strive to increase diversity, the findings in this study offer them data on the skills offered by African American women leaders. Additionally, the findings alert African American women as to which skills they should focus on using when addressing the various barriers to leadership once they are faced. The findings provide African American women with a guide and a toolbox of the top ten soft leadership skills they can utilize to overcome various barriers to corporate leadership. Chapter 5 will further discuss the findings and application of the Human Capital Theory to African American women's soft skills and their ability to serve as KSAOs for organizational value.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Implications, and Conclusion

Overview

This study aimed to explore the lived experiences of African American women in corporate America and explore the role of soft skills in their ability to navigate barriers to corporate leadership. The research questions of this study focused on the role of soft skills along African American women's journey in corporate America, the barriers they faced, and their ability to utilize soft skills to navigate the barriers. This chapter discusses the implication of the findings of the study regarding the definition of soft skills, the Center for Creative leadership's top ten leadership soft skills, African American women's use of soft skills, the organizational value of soft skills, effective leadership, barriers to corporate leadership, and African American women's use of soft skills to navigate barriers.

Organization of the Remainder of this Chapter

The first section of this chapter discusses the contributions of this study. Next, this chapter discusses the implications of the findings while analyzing the human capital theory. Then the recommendations, future research, limitations, and conclusion follow.

Contribution of the Study

The findings of this study contribute to understanding how African American women utilize soft skills to navigate barriers to corporate leadership. The data collected in this study further enhances research by providing the lived experiences of African American women in corporate leadership, which addresses a gap in the literature. Previous literature has identified barriers, addressed African

American women's use of mentors and sponsors to overcome barriers, and discussed the value of soft skills. However, the literature does address how African American women can utilize soft skills to navigate barriers and elevate to corporate leadership. The findings of this study show that African American women heighten the use of soft skills to navigate barriers to leadership while utilizing soft skills to build relationships, which also helps navigate barriers. Additional findings of this study address how African American women utilize soft skills to navigate barriers to corporate leadership, including how African American women utilize resiliency, political savvy, building relationships at all levels, communication, and creating a culture of trust and respect. The findings of this study aid African American women in navigating barriers to corporate leadership. It advises them on utilizing soft skills throughout their careers while navigating and overcoming challenges. The findings further raise awareness of the value of African American women leaders to organizations. It further informs them that African American women's soft skills are KSAOs and human capital resources that work together to benefit the organization.

Discussion and Implications

This study's findings support the main research question of the role of soft skills in African American women's ascension to corporate leadership roles within an organization. The findings also support the sub-question of how the acquisition of soft skills impacts African American women's ability to break barriers to corporate leadership roles within an organization. The findings reveal that soft skills play a critical role in an African American women's ability to ascend to

corporate leadership. In identifying the role of soft skills, African American women must first define soft skills. This study found that African American women consider soft skills innate or gained from their upbringing and unique experiences. The findings further support the main research question by revealing that soft skills the participants listed as impactful to their career journey align with the top ten leadership soft skills by the Center for Creative leadership.

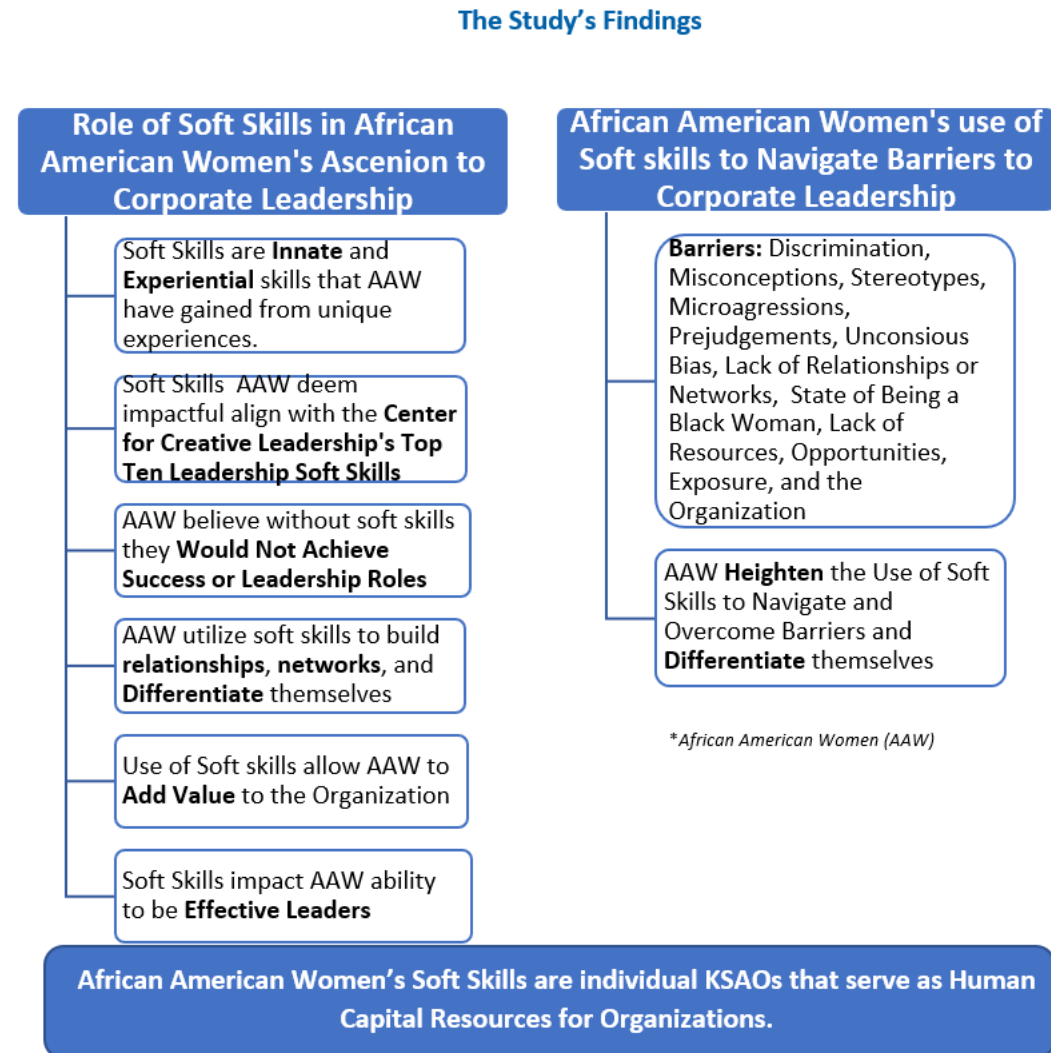
To directly answer the main research question, the study shows that African American women in corporate America believe that without soft skills, specifically the Center for Creative leadership's top ten soft skills, they would not succeed or advance to leadership positions. The findings emphasize that they utilize soft skills to build relationships, networks, and differentiate themselves. The study's results further answer the primary research on the role of soft skills by showing the soft skills benefit African American women and the organization. The use of soft skills enables them to add value to their organization. African American women can add value to their organizations through effective leadership. The study further emphasizes that the Center for Creative Leadership's top ten soft leadership skills impact their ability to lead effectively. The study identified communication as the center of effective leadership.

The study's results support the sub-question of African American women's ability to break barriers to corporate leadership using soft skills. The study shows that African American women do utilize soft skills to navigate and overcome barriers to corporate leadership. The study revealed the following barriers:

discrimination, misconceptions, stereotypes, microaggressions, prejudgments, unconscious bias, lack of relationships or networks, the state of being a black woman, lack of resources, opportunities, exposure, and the organization itself. The findings additionally show that African American women must heighten the use of soft skills to navigate barriers to corporate leadership and differentiate themselves. In sum, the findings are that soft skills are vital for African American women in corporate America. They can use these soft skills along the way to set themselves apart, stand out, land leadership positions, and overcome obstacles to corporate leadership. Finally, soft skills are a part of African American women's KSAOs that allow them to serve as human capital resources for an organization.

Figure 23

Study's Findings



Innate and Experiential Soft Skills

The results of this study agree with past researchers who state that soft skills are a term in search of meaning (Matteson et al., 2017; Touloumakos, 2020). As the participants discussed soft skills, the provided definitions varied amongst participants, though there were slight similarities in their descriptions. The findings

show that most participants agreed on many definitions of soft skills, such as innate, intangible, interpersonal, and non-technical. The findings show that most people do not know how to define soft skills affirmatively because, as past research has shown, the list of soft skills is continuously growing (Cimatti, 2016; Hurrell et al., 2013; Matteson et al., 2017; Robles, 2012; Touloumakos, 2020). However, the theme that emerged was that soft skills are innate and gained through the upbringing and experiences of African American women. African American women considered soft skills innate or skills instilled in them early in their upbringing. They relate the soft skills to the skills they have gained through their unique experiences in corporate America as a dual minority.

The results of this study agree with the studies that found African American women gain skills through their unique experiences. Parker and Ogilvie (1996), DeLany and Rogers (2004), Parker (2005), and Sims and Carter (2019) found that African American women have unique experiences in their upbringing throughout their lives and careers that build a unique skill set which includes soft skills. Being raised as an African American female impacted participants' innate skills; African American women realized that at an early age, their parents understood what it meant to live in the world as a minority. Therefore, their parents or guardians focused on instilling skills and abilities that will allow them to be successful in the world. These skills overlapped with many soft skills, such as communication, resiliency, people skills, and the ability to read the room. African American women faced challenges throughout their lives and careers that included discrimination,

racism, unconscious bias, and microaggressions which forced them to develop skills that allowed them to navigate these challenges. This study found that these experiences forced them to build soft skills using their intuition and innate abilities that would allow them to survive and excel. The participants explained that these skills are just in them and intuitive because of their experiences as black women. For example, resiliency came from their ability to keep striving despite adversity from a young age and the barriers they faced throughout their lives. African American women developed the ability to read the room because when they were in an environment where their dual minority status was not accepted, their intuition would kick in. They would use innate abilities to navigate in that uncomfortable space. Those environments are where communication, building relationships, creating a culture of trust, respect, and self-awareness would be heightened. The ability to read the room is like being politically savvy, a top ten weak leadership skill. Political savvy is necessary to understand office politics; from an African American woman's perspective, they need this skill to understand how they are perceived in that room as a black female. Is her dual minority status accepted, understood, appreciated, or respected? Parker and Ogilvie (1996) found that these same skills developed from their innate abilities and experiences allow African American women leaders to exhibit specific characteristics as leaders.

Center for Creative Leadership's Top Ten Leadership Soft Skills

The findings show that many of these skills participants identified as soft skills(see Figure 14) align with the top ten leadership soft skills named by the Center for Creative Leadership (see Figure 7). The study participants identified

many of the same soft skills as the Center for Creative leadership without the researcher prompting the question. Although there is no universal meaning of soft skills, the participants defined soft skills using many of the same skills as in previous literature. All of the soft skills listed by the participants (see Figure 14) were included in previous literature (Cimatti, 2016; Hurrell et al., 2013; Kim et al., 2011; Matteson et al., 2017; Robles, 2012; Touloumakos, 2020), except for code-switching, how one shows up, and reading the room. These were the soft skills that the previous literature did not include. Code-switching is altering one's language dialect when interacting with different groups of people (Nilep, 2006). Myers (2020) further explained that African Americans utilize code-switching as a social technique when adopting dual behaviors and dialects. African Americans utilize this technique to belong and gain acceptance in a white-dominant society (Myers, 2020). Reading the room is understanding the feelings, emotions, and opinions of those in one's environment and adjusting behavior to act accordingly (Digital Cultures, 2021). How one shows up is how an individual presents themselves to their colleagues, including their attitude, presence, professionalism, and abilities (Annabel & Scrymgeour, 2018).

Although the Center for Creative Leadership does not explicitly list code-switching, reading the room, and how one shows up, these soft skills closely align with the top ten leadership soft skills. The Center for Creative Leadership defines the skill of political savvy (see Figure 7) as “the ability to influence people to obtain goals. The heart of being politically savvy is networking, reading situations,

and thinking before speaking. Not every leader likes politics, but it's present in every organization" (Kalman, 2012, pp. 1-2). Political savvy aligns with reading the room, code-switching, and how one shows up. These skills involve adapting oneself or behaviors for acceptance into a particular culture or environment. Furthermore, self-awareness ties into these abilities because one must know their weaknesses to adjust their behaviors. Political savvy includes reading the room, adjusting how one shows up, and code-switching. Each of these skills ties to being politically savvy in the workplace.

Additionally, the participants identified skills they possess and those necessary for their careers; these skills closely aligned with the top ten leadership soft skills. The results show that the top five skills possessed by the participants were communication, the ability to read a room, the ability to know how to show up, people skills, and emotional intelligence. The Center for Creative leadership explicitly lists communication and emotional intelligence; however, reading a room and knowing how to show up directly ties to political savvy. The Center for Creative Leadership's soft skills of motivating and engaging others, building relationships at all levels, and creating a culture of trust and respect are all considered people skills. The findings show that participants listed the top three skills necessary for their careers: communication, adaptability, and building relationships. All three of these skills align with the top ten leadership soft skills of communication, political savvy, learning agility, and building relationships at all levels. The participants listed various skill sets that align closely with the top ten

leadership soft skills (see Figure 12). The study results show that when participants were not prompted by the Center for Creative Leadership's top ten leadership soft skills list, the soft skills they deemed impactful closely aligned with those identified by Kalman (2012).

African American women's heightened use of Soft Skills

African American women in corporate America feel they would not be successful or gain leadership roles without using soft skills, specifically, the Center for Creative Leadership's top ten soft skills. African American women utilize soft skills to build relationships and networks while using the same skills to differentiate themselves from their counterparts. African American women feel that hard work is insufficient, but they must prove they have much more to offer: their soft skills. For this reason, they must hyperactivate their soft skills along their career journeys. The Spencer and Spencer (1993) study showed that high-performer employees and those that stand out are the ones who can not only perform their job with hard skills but those who manifest soft skills. Wheeler (2016) further explained that soft skills are the skills that allow people to use their technical skills and knowledge effectively to add value to the workplace. This study's results align with the assertions made by Spencer and Spencer (1993) and Wheeler (2016).

Soft skills play a major role in the ability of African American women to attain leadership positions and establish successful careers. Majid et al. (2012) found that the right mix of soft skills plays a significant role in an individual's ability to be successful. The study found that African American women feel that

hard work and technical skills are not enough to be successful, so they must often utilize more of their soft skill set, even more than their peers. Dharmarajan et al. (2012) found that soft skills work hand-in-hand with hard skills for individuals to succeed in their careers because soft skills are not enough on their own. Where this might be the case for all, African American women must utilize these skills to overcome barriers they face as a dual minority. This perspective aligns with Tang (2020), who found that soft skills strengthen individuals' hard skills and competencies. Therefore, when African American women can utilize soft skills more than their peers, they can strengthen the hard skills and abilities they bring to the organization. The Wesley et al. (2017) study concluded that soft skills complement an individual's hard skills, allowing them to use their technical skills to their full advantage. This provides a competitive advantage, which explains why African American women feel they cannot be successful without using soft skills.

While African American women utilize soft skills to build relationships, the Center for Creative Leadership lists building relationships at all levels as a soft skill. From whichever perspective, African American women's ability to build relationships dramatically impacts their ability to ascend. Majid et al. (2012) found that building relationships are influential in an individual's career journey because it can add to their social interactions in the workplace. This study found that African American women hyperactivate soft skills to build and leverage relationships to ascend to leadership roles, meaning they ensure their soft skills are

extremely active and utilized. Hewlett et al. (2012) and Sales et al. (2020) stressed the importance of building social capital for African American women to overcome obstacles and attain leadership roles. The results of this study align with Hewlett et al. (2012) and Sales et al. (2020) as they show that African American women lean on soft skills when building relationships that will allow them to elevate within their careers. Building social capital, including mentors and sponsors, allows African American women to have relationships with colleagues that will advocate and speak on their behalf, which assists with elevation to leadership. The study further found that African American women must leverage their relationships to benefit from their work ethic, knowledge, abilities, and technical skills because organizational leadership often overlooks their abilities.

Because African American women are sometimes overlooked, this study shows that they heighten the use of soft skills to differentiate themselves and stand out amongst their counterparts. Based on Spencer and Spencer (1993) and Wheeler (2016), using soft skills allows African American women to achieve above their peers and stand out. The results of this study align with Spencer and Spencer (1993) and Wheeler (2016). African American women found it beneficial to utilize soft skills as a competitive advantage to elevate their careers. They also found that they must utilize their soft skills more than their peers. These findings align with Newell (2002), who explained that soft skills could serve as a competitive advantage because some employees feel they are intelligent or smart and disregard

soft skills. This allows African American women to separate themselves from their peers who only focus on their technical skills.

Soft Skills and Organizational Value

African American women utilize soft skills throughout their career journey to allow them to elevate within their careers. However, they also use those skills to add value to their organizations. The findings indicate that African American women add value to their organizations through their soft skills. Lahope et al. (2020) and Seetha (2014) linked an organization's performance and their employee's possession of soft skills. Seetha (2014) found that soft skills were critical to an organization's performance. Lahope et al. (2020) concluded that possessing soft skills allows employees to work optimally, enhancing the organization's performance. The findings of this study align with Lahope et al. (2020) and Seetha (2014) and show that African American women add value to their organization through their leadership while utilizing soft skills. This study further shows that communication is essential to adding value to an organization. Communication is the primary soft skill that African American women feel they use to add value to their organization. Communication skills enable them to communicate effectively with their teams, which fosters team productivity. Communication and many other top ten leadership soft skills, such as emotional intelligence, creating a culture of trust and respect, self-awareness, and engaging and motivating others, allow African American women to build and lead effective teams. Building and leading effective teams allow African American women to add value to the organization because their team's success reflects their leadership.

Overall, team productivity supports the organization. Effective and productive teams support the business, which adds value to the organization.

From an individual standpoint, African American women add value to their organization through resiliency, learning agility, and political savvy. The findings show that African American women utilize resiliency to strive for excellent job outcomes, even when faced with challenges. This skill allows them to utilize creative problem-solving often to perform their current roles. Using resiliency to overcome challenges adds to the organization and is sometimes seen as innovation. Resiliency allows African American women to excel in their jobs, supporting the organization's success. They also utilize learning agility to recognize weaknesses and seek learning opportunities to improve them. The willingness to learn and improve adds value to the organization through increased knowledge and skills. Being politically savvy allows African American women to influence the organization's leaders in strategic decision-making when their ideas and opinions may not be received well. This ability sometimes adds new ideas, methods, and innovation to the organization. These study results are supported by Seetha (2014), who stated that employees could add value to the workplace through their teamwork, attitude, social and interpersonal abilities, problem-solving, and leadership. When organizations employ individuals with soft skills, it is a competitive advantage when soft skills are lacking for their competitors (McGahren, 2009; Newell, 2002). Therefore, African American women can add value to an organization by providing a competitive advantage.

Effective Leadership

The findings of this study show that the Center for Creative Leadership's top ten leadership soft skills impacts African American women's ability to lead effectively. The study found that soft skills impact their ability to be effective leaders. These results align with Muir (2004) and AbuJbara and Worley (2018), who found that soft skills are essential to leadership. Muir (2004) further emphasized that leaders can boost their performance when they possess and utilize soft skills. The study revealed that communication was the top soft skill for effective leadership. Communication is the center of effective leadership as it is needed to communicate goals, ideas, and strategies, enabling African American women leaders to add value to their organization. Communication skills allow them to build and lead effective teams while motivating and engaging others, also included in the top ten leadership soft skills. Other soft skills such as political savviness, emotional intelligence, and self-awareness aid African American women in effectively communicating. African American women must be aware of how they communicate and are received by their counterparts. This may cause them to utilize political savviness, emotional intelligence, and self-awareness to adapt to the situation. Adapting their communication enables them to influence and lead their teams effectively. Rao (2015) found that soft skills help leaders become influential, and it helps with their ability to lead. Islam et al. (2018) studied factors that allow women in leadership roles to influence others and concluded that soft skills were significant. The findings of this study align with Rao (2015) and Islam et al. (2018).

Previous studies have shown that African American women gain skills and attributes that allow them to be influential dynamic leaders. These studies further show they gain leadership skills through unique experiences (Byrd, 2009; DeLany & Rogers, 2004; Parker, 2005; Parker & Ogilvie, 1996; Sims & Carter, 2019). This study shows that African American women have gained soft skills through their upbringing and unique experiences. They have utilized these skills to attain corporate leadership and success. The findings further revealed that African American women leaders utilize all ten leadership soft skills as influential leaders and use them at different times. Additionally, they must know when to utilize each particular skill because they are not all used simultaneously.

Barriers to Corporate Leadership

Based on the results of this study, the barriers to corporate leadership that African American women face include discrimination, misconceptions, stereotypes, microaggressions, prejudgments, unconscious bias, lack of relationships or networks, the state of being a black woman, lack of resources, opportunities, exposure, and the organization itself. Kandola (2004) found that African American women face individual and organizational barriers to corporate leadership. The following barriers are considered individual: stereotyping, interpersonal dynamics, and informal and formal networks (Kandola, 2004). Organizational barriers include organizational culture, systems and procedures, and tokenism (Kandola, 2004). Beckwith et al. (2016) stated that dual bias status of race, stereotypes, and the pressure that more is needed from African American women to compete are all barriers to corporate leadership. Erskine et al. (2021) explained that African

American women face obstacles to corporate leadership, such as implicit bias, questioning of credibility, information networks, racial segregation, emotional tax of being a black woman, and limited access to power within an organization.

The barriers to corporate leadership identified in this study, such as discrimination, misconceptions, stereotypes, microaggressions, prejudgments, unconscious bias, lack of resources, opportunities, and the state of being a black woman are individual barriers as defined by Kandola (2004). According to Kandola (2004), lack of resources, opportunities, exposure, and the organization itself are considered organizational barriers. The results of this study support the assertions made by Kandola (2004) as to the barriers that African American women face when seeking leadership positions in corporate America. The participants of this study experienced barriers described by Kandola (2004). Lack of resources, opportunities, and exposure are similar to informal and formal networks because networks are often the source of exposure, opportunities, and resources. Without access to these networks, African American women lack access to opportunities and resources. Erskine et al. (2021) explained that African American women lack access to power within the organization. The participants of this study expressed that they lacked access to resources, opportunities, and networks, which supports Erskine et al. (2021) assertion that they lack access to power, which acts as a barrier to leadership. Beckwith et al. (2016) also explained that stereotypes are a barrier that ties to the idea that more is needed from African American women to

compete. Due to stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination, black women must work hard to overcome how others perceive them.

Beckwith et al. (2016) label this pressure that black women face as a barrier. This study showed that African American women feel that the state of being a black woman is a barrier in itself. Being a black woman comes with pressures others do not experience, so African American women consider being a black woman a barrier. The study also reveals that African American women feel that the lack of networks is a barrier because the ability to leverage relationships is crucial to elevation. According to Kandola (2004), organizational barriers also exist, which aligns with the results of this study that show the organization itself serves as a barrier to corporate leadership. An organization's culture, policies, and practices can limit African American women's elevation in corporate America (Kandola, 2004). Based on the results of this study, African American women experience implicit and unconscious bias, prejudice, and misconceptions, mainly shown through microaggressions. Because of these barriers, African American women must adapt their behavior to overcome the challenges. In turn, this creates the pressure of being a black woman, as described by Beckwith et al. (2016), who labeled these pressures as a barrier. These findings coincide with Erskine et al. (2021), who linked the barriers to access to power. The participants of this study experienced the barriers described by Kandola (2004), Beckwith et al. (2016), and Erskine et al. (2021).

African American women's use of Soft Skills to Navigate Barriers

The findings of this study show that African American women must heighten their use of soft skills to navigate barriers to corporate leadership. African American women also utilize a heightened sense of soft skills to navigate barriers by using their soft skills to differentiate themselves and stand out amongst their colleagues. Past research identified methods for African American women to overcome barriers to corporate leadership that include sponsorship, mentorship, networking, and honing professional development (Hewlett et al., 2012; Jenkins, 2005; Johns, 2013; Kombarakaran et al., 2008; Randel et al., 2021; Sales et al., 2020). Iyengar (2017) described networking as the final frontier of soft skills, meaning that networking encompasses all soft skills, including communication, interpersonal, and people skills. The present study results show that African Americans utilize soft skills such as building relationships, communication, reading the room or political savvy, and resiliency to navigate barriers to leadership roles. As Iyengar (2017) stated, networking is the frontier of soft skills; many of the soft skills identified in the study are crucial to networking, such as communication, political savvy, building relationships at all levels, creating a culture of trust and respect, motivating and engaging others and reading the room. Iyengar (2017) said that networking is vital to sponsorship, mentorship, and coaching, which researchers have identified as tools to help African American women navigate barriers (Hewlett et al., 2012; Jenkins, 2005; Johns, 2013; Kombarakaran et al., 2008; Randel et al., 2021; Sales et al., 2020;).

The results of this study align closely with past researchers, where they discuss the use of communication and people skills to build relationships through networking to allow African American women the ability to navigate barriers. The African American women who participated in this study agreed with the impact of soft skills, such as building relationships at all levels, on their ability to navigate barriers. Smith et al. (2019) specified that networking is vital to establishing strategic relationships. Smith et al. (2019) described strategic relationships as mentorship, sponsorship, and coaching. Based on De Janasz and Forret (2008) and Davis (2016) and this study, building strategic relationships enables African American women to navigate barriers to leadership. The results of this study show that African American women utilize diverse relations to dissuade others' stereotypes, misconceptions, discrimination, microaggressions, or unconscious biases against black women. The findings further show that African American women can build trust with their colleagues through relationships. This study shows that as African American women gain sponsorships and mutually beneficial relationships through their soft skills, they gain advocates who vouch for them. These relationships enable them to break down barriers and allow others to recognize their skills and abilities instead of being blinded by the barriers. In turn, these relationships expose African American women to opportunities and resources, which overcomes the barrier of lack of resources, exposure, and opportunities.

The findings also revealed that communication and resiliency are vital to an African American woman's ability to navigate barriers throughout their career. Like Iyengar (2017), this study found that African American women utilize communication to network and form strategic relationships. This study further shows that African American women overcome stereotypes, discrimination, misconceptions, prejudices, and microaggressions by communicating those barriers to their counterparts. They have found that exposing the barriers has helped them successfully navigate these challenges. Iyengar (2017) added that character traits could also be necessary soft skills. This finding ties to the African American women's ability to utilize resiliency to overcome barriers. Resiliency is one of the skills African American women have gained through their upbringing and experiences (Byrd, 2009; DeLany & Rogers, 2004; Parker, 2005; Parker & Ogilvie, 1996; Sims & Carter, 2019). This study's findings show that African American women utilize resiliency to bounce back once they have faced a barrier. Resiliency plays a major role in their ability to overcome any barrier to corporate leadership that they face.

African American Women as Human Capital

The results of this study show that soft skills are critical for African American women. They can utilize these skills along their journey to differentiate themselves, stand out, attain leadership roles, and navigate barriers to corporate leadership. The findings also show that soft skills are a part of their KSAOs that allow them to serve as a human capital resource for an organization. The human capital theory was applied to this study as it conceptualizes how organizations are

not taking advantage of African American women as human capital resources (Becker, 1964). Becker (1994) defined human capital as “knowledge, information, skills, and health of individuals” (p. 1). Ployhart et al. (2014) expanded the definition of human capital to include an individual’s knowledge, abilities, skills, and other characteristics (KSAOs) at the organizational level. The participants of this study defined soft skills in a way that aligns with Ployhart et al. (2014) and Becker’s (1994) definition of human capital. They identified many attributes (See Figure 14) considered skills and abilities within KSAOs, including adaptability, interpersonal, communication, networking, and nontechnical skills.

This study found that soft skills are critical to African American women’s careers. Noe et al. (2006) defined knowledge as information that an individual needs in order to complete a task, skills such as an individual’s capacity to perform specific tasks, ability as an individual’s capabilities that applies to various job tasks, and other capabilities as personality traits that influence the job. Based on Noe et al. (2006), the soft skills(see Figures 16, Figure 17, and Figure 18) that African American women possess and those they need to climb the corporate ladder, lead, and navigate barriers are KSAOs because they are skills needed to perform on the job and other capabilities needed to influence the job. The soft skills described in this study such as resiliency, political savvy, reading the room, building relationships at all levels, creating a culture of trust and respect, and adaptability, are all other necessary capabilities such as personality traits. The soft skills that the participants identified as needed for effective leadership, such as

building and leading effective teams motivating and engaging others, creating a culture of trust and respect, and communication, are also KSAOs. Based on Ployhart et al. (2014) and Noe et al. (2006) communication is considered a skill. Building and leading effective teams, motivating and engaging others, and creating a culture of trust and respect align with necessary capabilities. However, building and leading effective teams can be viewed as a skill.

Although the soft skills possessed by African American women are individual talents and skills that make up the individual, the individual brings these skills to the organization. In turn, the African American woman impacts the organization's capabilities, according to Becker (1994), Becker (2002) Ployhart et al. (2014), and Wright et al. (1994). Schultz (1961) explained that when a resource is utilized effectively, it benefits the economy, the organization, and the individual. The findings of this study reveal that soft skill benefits African American women while allowing them to add value to their organization. Figure 18 shows the soft skills that African American women utilize to add value to their organizations. These results align with Schultz (1961) and Becker (2002). According to Becker (2002), human capital is the most important form of economic capital because it can create value for individuals, organizations, and society. Bontis et al. (1999) explained that human capital is the combination of intelligence, skills, and knowledge that distinguishes each organization. The Bontis et al. (1999) study described human capital as three resource types: competencies, attitude, and intellectual agility, which aligns with the soft skills discussed in this study.

Based on Ployhart et al. (2014), African American women's KSAOs are considered human capital resources if they are accessible and relevant to produce unit-level outcomes. Human capital resources start with their individual KSAOs (Ployhart et al., 2014) and can exist at multiple levels. KSAOs are both cognitive and noncognitive (Ployhart et al., 2014). Additionally, human capital resources are present in the individual, unit, and collective units (Ployhart et al., 2014). Using the implications of Ployhart et al. (2014), the African American women's soft skills identified in this study are KSAOs. Based on Ployhart and Moliterno (2011), African American women's individual soft skills, which are KSAOs, are transformed into valuable unit-level resources. Figure 2 shows how African American women's soft skills, as KSAOs at the individual level, are used to create human capital resources (Ployhart & Moliterno, 2011). Ployhart et al. (2014) used the micro-foundations perspective to clarify that human capital resources exist at the unit level and can exist at the individual level. The findings of this study show that African American women utilize soft skills along their career journey to elevation and leadership and to navigate barriers to corporate leadership. Soft skills are a part of individual KSAOs, which are micro-foundations of human capital resources, according to Ployhart et al. (2014). Within an organization, there are different types of human capital resources, which include individual KSAOs that contribute to the unit-level capacities. Therefore, the soft skills African American women utilize to navigate barriers to corporate leadership are individual KSAOs

considered human capital resources. These human capital resources contribute to organizational success.

Recommendations

The implications of this study regarding African American women's use of soft skills do not only apply to African American women. Soft skills are undoubtedly helpful for women and men of all races; however, this study focused on addressing the disparity of African American women in corporate leadership. Based on the results of this study, soft skills are critical for corporate success and leadership. They also are vital in overcoming barriers and challenges to corporate leadership. Additionally, soft skills possessed by African American women are KSAOs that contribute to the organization. Based on the implications of this study, there are recommendations for African American women in corporate America and organizations.

The findings of this study reveal that African American women utilize various soft skills along their corporate journey and have successfully used these soft skills to navigate barriers to corporate leadership. African American women have identified which soft skills have helped them most navigate barriers and how they have utilized them. Based on the study's results, African American women should hone their soft skills because they help them overcome barriers to corporate leadership while adding value to the organization. The study revealed that African American women gain soft skills through their upbringing, life experiences, and in some instances, their education. Additionally, soft skills can be innate. Newell (2002) found that intelligent people often place less emphasis on soft skills. This

study also found that sometimes African American women in less technical jobs may think soft skills are less beneficial. Therefore, some African American women may neglect to focus on the soft skills that can help them elevate and navigate barriers to soft skills. The findings of this study bring awareness to the importance of soft skills for African American women in corporate America. Although some soft skills may be innate or gained through experiences, there are ways for African American women to hone their soft skills through training and education. Therefore, the recommendation is that African American women seek ways to increase their soft skill set. Another recommendation is that African American women emphasize these soft skills when climbing the corporate ladder but understand that soft skills work hand-in-hand with technical skills.

The results of this study also lend recommendations to organizations. Organizations must recognize the value of African American women in leadership. The results of this study show that African American women bring their unique individual differences to the organization, which are KSAOs. These KSAOs serve as a human capital resource that can benefit the organization. Previous literature by Davis (2016) and this study show that organizations should recognize the potential of African American women leaders. Therefore, the recommendation is for organizations to focus on attracting, attaining, and retaining more African American leaders. Organizations can achieve this by focusing on diversity recruiting efforts through diversity, equity, and inclusion programs. Organizations should also invest in lower-level African American women employees with

leadership potential. These could include programs that facilitate mentorship and foster networking, soft skills, professional development programs, and leadership development programs focusing on African American leaders.

Future Research

This phenomenological study aimed to explore the role of soft skills in African American women's ability to navigate barriers to corporate leadership. The study determined that soft skills are critical in the African American woman's corporate journey. The study raised some issues that are subjects for future research that add to the literature on the role of soft skills in African American women's corporate journey. While this study focused on African American women, future phenomenological studies should explore African American men's use of soft skills. Then, African American women's use versus men's use should be compared. This study could answer whether African American women utilize soft skills more than African American men to face challenges and whether they face the same barriers to corporate leadership. There is also a lack of white women in corporate leadership; therefore, future research should explore how white women utilize soft skills to navigate barriers to corporate leadership.

The current study was a phenomenological study that explored the African American woman's perspective. In the future, a case study would be beneficial to include the perspective of those in the workplace on African American women's use of soft skills to attain leadership and their perspective of the value of African American women leaders. This would involve studying various organizations with African American women in leadership positions and would benefit organizations

in understanding the value of African American women leaders and their use of soft skills as KSAOs.

Some of the data collected in this study did not produce an emerging theme; however, this data deserves further research. Some participants mentioned code-switching as a soft skill in defining soft skills, though it was not defined in any literature as a soft skill. A mixed methods approach includes a quantitative study to analyze if African American women identify code-switching as a soft skill used to navigate barriers to corporate leadership, and an exploratory study on how African American women utilize code-switching in corporate America would benefit organizations and African American women. African American women could gain an understanding of the role of code-switching and the nuances of its use. Organizations could understand how African American women may adapt themselves in the workplace to navigate barriers; therefore, they could better understand African American leaders. The data collected in regards to barriers introduced the barrier of imposter syndrome. A mixed methods approach that includes a quantitative study to identify if African American women feel imposter syndrome is a barrier and an exploratory study into how African American women navigate the barrier of imposter syndrome would be beneficial. Additionally, a quantitative study into which soft skills African American women find most useful to navigate barriers to corporate leadership would be helpful for organizations and African American women to understand which soft skills they should place their focus. A quantitative study narrows the list of soft skills. A quantitative study could

also study the relationships between African American women's possession of soft skills and the level of leadership they have attained. These types of quantitative studies could widen the participation of the study to include a large number of participants, which would increase the impact of the study.

Limitations and Assumptions

The purpose of this study lent itself to a phenomenological study. The limitation of this qualitative study is the small number of participants. This study was based on the perspective of 20 African American women participants. Though the number of participants was only 20, a phenomenological study allows for a deep understanding of each participant's experience to explore the role of soft skills in their careers. It is impossible to interview every African American woman in corporate America. A quantitative approach could include more participants but less of a deep understanding of their experience. Another limitation of this study was that some participants seemed to feel they needed to answer the questions politically correctly. The interviewer asked questions to lower some guards the participants placed around the subject. The participants were assured that they could answer the questions candidly and, throughout the interview, became more candid. However, this may have limited the information they were willing to share, though the data collected was robust. Most of the participants of this study were middle management, which is limiting because top management's perspective may have differed from middle management's. Middle management leaders were those who were more willing to participate in the study. This is more than likely due to the time commitment of top management.

Along with limitations there were some assumptions of this study. As the study explored African American women. There was an assumption that all black women considered themselves African American where some only consider themselves black women. This is why the explanation of this ethnic group is explained in the definition section of the paper. Another assumption was that all African American women in corporate America recognize the challenges that they face as barriers. Some may only see the obstacles as challenges that they must face along their journey. The last assumption that was made was that everyone knew what soft skills were. The researcher allowed the participant to define soft skills from their common meaning at the beginning of the interview, but then provided the definition for the second half of questioning. This allowed for the researcher to gather data for new skills that the participants may have defined as soft skills.

Conclusion

This phenomenological study aimed to explore the role of soft skills in how African American women utilize soft skills to navigate barriers to corporate leadership positions within an organization. African American women face challenges and barriers that hinder their ability to attain organizational leadership roles. The disparity of African American women in leadership has been long-lasting. This study sought to identify how African American women can utilize their skills or gain new skills to benefit them as they navigate barriers to leadership roles. This study shows that African American women find soft skills vital as they elevate their careers and navigate barriers. Soft skills play a major role in their ability to navigate barriers to corporate leadership. African American gain these

soft skills through their unique experience as a dual minority. These skills they gain can add value to organizations because they serve as individual KSAOs, which are human capital resources. Organizations can take advantage of the soft skills that African American women leaders possess by increasing diversity in leadership.

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APPENDIX A

Institutional Review Board Application

DocuSign Envelope ID: 42789702-09CB-481E-BED5-966227DC3066



RESEARCH INVOLVING HUMAN PARTICIPANTS EXEMPT APPLICATION

This form shall be used if there is minimal risk to human subjects. One of the categories on the next page applies to the research; if there is more than minimal risk associated with the research (none of the conditions apply) or if the research utilizes a special population (children, prisoners, institutionalized individuals, etc.), please use the expedited/full application form found on the IRB website.

You should consult the university's document Principles, Policy, and Applicability for Research Involving Human Subjects and instructions on the IRB website prior to completion of this form.

foridatech.edu/research/compliance--regulations/institutional-review-board

Submit via email to FIT_IRB@ft.edu.

IRB Contact Information:

Dr. Jignya Patel
IRB Chairperson
FIT_IRB@ft.edu
321-674-7391

INVESTIGATOR INFORMATION

Title of project "Exploring the significance of soft skills amongst African American women navigating barriers to achieve the C-suite"

Date of submission July 20, 2022

Expected project start date August 1, 2022

Expected project duration 7 months

Principal investigator Latoya Newell Burke

Title Doctoral Candidate

Academic unit Bisk School of Business - DBA Program

Phone 850-445-8641

Email newelll@cookman.edu

List all co-investigator(s). Please include name, title, academic unit/affiliation and email.

None

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CATEGORIES OF EXEMPT RESEARCH

Must choose one:

- ☐ Research conducted in established or commonly accepted educational settings, that specifically involves normal educational practices, that are not likely to adversely impact students' opportunity to learn required educational content or the assessment of educators who provide instruction. This includes:

- a. Research on regular and special education instruction strategies, or
- b. Research on the effectiveness of or the comparison among instruction techniques, curricula or classroom management methods.

- ☐ Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if at least one of the following criteria is met:

- a. The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects cannot readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects; or
- b. Any disclosure of the human subjects' responses outside the research would not reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, educational advancement, or reputation; or
- c. The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects can readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects, and IRB can determine if there are adequate provisions in place to protect the privacy of the subjects and confidentiality of the data.

Note: Subcategories A and B can include research with children if the research only includes educational tests or public observation and investigator does not take part in activities being observed; subcategory C does NOT apply to research involving children.

- ☒ Research involving benign behavioral interventions in conjunction with the collection of information from an adult subject through verbal or written responses (including data entry) or audiovisual recording if the subject prospectively agrees to the intervention and information collection and at least one of the following criteria is met:

- a. The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects cannot readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects; or
- b. Any disclosure of the human subjects' responses outside the research would not reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, educational advancement, or reputation; or
- c. The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects can readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects, and IRB can determine if there are adequate provisions in place to protect the privacy of the subjects and confidentiality of the data.

Note: Benign behavioral interventions are brief in duration, harmless, painless, not physically invasive, not likely to have a significant adverse lasting impact on the subjects, and the investigator has no reason to think the subjects will find the interventions offensive or embarrassing. This exemption is not applicable to research with children and to research involving deception unless the subject authorizes deception.

- ☐ Secondary research for which consent is not required: Secondary research uses of identifiable private information or identifiable bio specimens, if at least one of the following criteria is met:

- a. The identifiable private information or identifiable bio specimens are publicly available;
- b. Information, which may include information about bio specimens, is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects cannot readily be ascertained directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects, the investigator does not contact the subjects, and the investigator will not re-identify subjects;
- c. The research involves only information collection and analysis involving the investigator's use of identifiable health information when that use is regulated by HIPAA as health care operations, research, or public health activities and purposes; or
- d. Analysis of data on behalf of a federal agency or department—as opposed to an investigator-initiated analysis of federally supplied data—if the requirements of certain federal laws are met. These sources are publicly available OR if the information is recorded in such a manner that subjects cannot be identified, directly or indirectly, through identifiers linked to the participants.

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- ☐ Research and demonstration projects that are conducted or supported by a federal department or agency, or otherwise subject to the approval of department or agency heads, and that are designed to study, evaluate, improve, or otherwise examine public benefit or service programs, including procedures for obtaining benefits or services under those programs, possible changes in or alternatives to those programs or procedures, or possible changes in methods or levels of payment for benefits or services under those programs. Examples of such projects include, but are not limited to, internal studies by federal employees, and studies under contracts or consulting arrangements, cooperative agreements, or grants.
- ☐ Taste and food quality evaluation and consumer acceptance studies if:
 - a. Wholesome foods without additives are consumed, or
 - b. Food is consumed that contains food ingredients found to be safe by the Food and Drug Administration or approved by the Environmental Protection Agency or the Food Safety and Inspection Service of the U.S. Department of Agriculture.
- ☐ Storage or maintenance for secondary research (prior to secondary analyses) for which broad consent is required:
 - a. Storage or maintenance of identifiable private information or identifiable bio specimens for potential secondary research use if an IRB can determine adequate provisions in place to protect the privacy of the subjects and confidentiality of the data (e.g., storing student data collected from previously conducted surveys).

Note: Visit foridatech.edu/broad-consent-form for instructions on creating broad consent.
- ☐ Secondary research for which broad consent is required: Research involving the secondary analysis of existing private identifiable data and identifiable bio specimens if the following criteria are met:
 - a. Broad consent for the storage, maintenance, and secondary research use of the identifiable private information or identifiable bio specimens was obtained, and
 - b. Documentation of informed consent or waiver of informed consent was obtained, and
 - c. The IRB determines that there are adequate provisions to protect the privacy of subjects and maintain the confidentiality of data, and
 - d. The investigator does not include returning individual research results to subjects as part of the study plan.

Note: Visit foridatech.edu/broad-consent-form for instructions on creating broad consent.

RESEARCH FUNDING

If any part of this study will be funded by an external funding source, you must note the funding source and award/solicitation number below:

None



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ANSWER THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS AS THOROUGHLY AS POSSIBLE.

1. List the objectives of the proposed project.

Purpose

The purpose of this study will be to explore how African American women professionals utilize soft skills to navigate barriers to corporate leadership positions within an organization. This study will describe the common meaning and trends for African American professionals who have navigated barriers to corporate leadership roles. It seeks to discover what role soft skills play in the journey of African American women leaders as they seek to attain corporate leadership roles.

Specific Aims

This study will explore whether soft skills were considered a significant skill essential in navigating the barriers they faced as they pursued corporate leadership. The implications of this study will raise awareness of the significant role of soft skills in African American women's ability to attain leadership roles. It will further alert African American women on the importance of cultivating soft skills.

Research Questions

Research Question: What role does soft skills play in African American women's ascension to corporate leadership roles within an organization?

Sub question: How does the acquisition of soft skills impact African American women's ability to break barriers to corporate leadership roles within an organization?

2. Describe the research project design/methodology. Discuss how you will conduct your study and what measurement instruments you are using. Attach all research materials to this application. Please describe your study in enough detail so the IRB can identify what you are doing and why.

This study is a phenomenological qualitative approach that will seek to understand the lived experience of African American women in corporate leadership as they ascended to their positions. Qualitative inquiry is necessary when a problem or issue should be explored (Creswell & Poth, 2016). A qualitative inquiry is also necessary to study human group life (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). This research lends itself to phenomenology because this approach will allow the researcher to study the lived experience of the African American women as they navigate barriers in corporate America and how they experience it directly.

The methods of this study will include open-ended questions, interviews, and theme and pattern interpretation, which calls for a qualitative approach. The interview protocol is attached to this application. Open-ended questions will be aligned with the research questions in the interview protocol which is attached. The interview protocol shows how the open-ended interview questions align with the research questions. The researcher will focus on the data that leads to structural and textual descriptions of the participants' experiences in corporate America.

The researcher will generate themes from analyzing the participants' significant statements. The themes will come from the cluster of meanings drawn from the participants' statements. Next, the researcher will use the themes to generate a description of the participants' experience navigating barriers to corporate leadership using soft skills. The researcher will integrate all of the textual and structural descriptions into a composite description to report the phenomenon's essence. Last, the researcher will present the understanding of African American women's use of soft skills to navigate barriers to corporate leadership.

The interviews will be conducted using the phone and/or video conferencing. The interviews will then be transcribed. Based on the transcriptions, follow-up interviews may be needed. At that time, follow-up interviews will be conducted using video conferencing or phone interviews. The interviews will be recording in order to be transcribed. The recordings will be destroyed at the conclusion of this study.

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3. Describe the characteristics of the participant population, including number, age, sex and recruitment strategy (attach actual recruitment email text, recruitment flyers, etc.).

Characteristics of the Targeted participants:

The targeted participant for this study is African American women over the age of 18 in corporate leadership roles within an organization. The target population must also have at least five years of leadership experience.

Number of Participants

Based on the Morse (2000) factors and participant guidelines provided by Morse (1994) and Creswell and Poth (2016), this study will need between five and twenty-five participants. The Morse (2000) factors will influence the number of participants selected for this study. However, there is no predetermined number of participants. The study will utilize the analysis of factors provided by Morse (2000) to determine the actual number of participants. This study will target between twenty and twenty-five participants to interview based on Morse (2000) and Creswell and Poth (2016). However if saturation is reached before the target goal, the participants will be fewer.

Recruitment strategy:

Sources for potential participants include Florida A&M University Alumni, LinkedIn, and Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc. The sources for potential participant will include my Florida A&M University network, professionals who have met over the years, who I am connected with on LinkedIn, and members of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc. I will send a recruitment email to all potential participants. The recruitment email is attached. I will also ask potential participants if they have recommendations for potential participants. I have also included a phone script in case I recruit via phone.

4. Describe any potential risks to the participants (physical, psychological, social, legal, etc.) and assess their likelihood and seriousness. Describe steps that will be taken to mitigate each risk.

There are no foreseeable potential physical risks associated with your participation in this study. All together, there are minimal risk associated with this study. To the extent that some questions may have psychological or social risks based on a participant's sensitivity to some questions, the participant may choose at any time not to answer any question or withdraw from the study.

Confidentiality is a concern and the researcher will take all precautions necessary to maintain confidentiality of the participants. The participants will choose pseudonyms to be used throughout the study. Upon completion of the study all records will be destroyed. Any files linking the participant to their pseudonym will also be destroyed.



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5. Describe the procedures you will use to maintain the confidentiality and privacy of your research participants and project data. If video or audio recordings will be made, you must review the video/audio recording policy found on the IRB website and address precautions you will take in this section.

The participants' identity will be kept confidential to the extent provided by law. The participant will identify a pseudonym that will be used throughout the study and the organization the participant works for will not be identified. The participants' name will not be used in any report or future publications of this study. However, the participant may be quoted in the study using the pseudonym without reference to any information that may be used to identify the participant. The only person who will be aware of the participants' identity will be the researcher. The data collected will be kept by the researcher and it will not be shared with others. Florida Institute of Technology will not release your information without your permission unless required by law. When the study is completed and the data has been analyzed, the audio recordings will be destroyed. The interviews will be recorded. The interview recordings will be used to transcribe and then code the results according to themes using coding software. Only the audio will be recorded if video conferencing software is used. The participant will be asked to keep their camera off during the interview. If phone conferencing is used for the interviews only the audio will be recorded. The researcher will ask the participant to ensure that there are no other persons in the room with them during the interview. The researcher will ensure that no other persons are in the room with them during to interview. This is to avoid the inclusion of nonparticipants on the recordings. No other person will have access to the recordings unless required by law. The recordings will be stored on the researcher's hard drive during the study. No other persons have access to the researcher's hard drive. At the conclusion of this study, the recordings will be permanently deleted from the researcher's hard drive.

6. Describe your plan for informed consent (attach proposed form).

The participants will sign an informed consent form. The informed consent form is attached. The researcher will read the form to the participant and answer any questions. The participant and the researcher will sign the form. Florida Institute of Technology provides a template for informed consent forms. The template was used with an addition of headings. The headings of the informed consent include:

Purpose of the study: Why is the Study Being Done?
 Procedure of the study: What is involved in this study?
 Potential Risks of Participants: What are the risks associated with this study?
 Compensation: Will I be compensated for my participation in this study?
 Confidentiality: How will my privacy be protected?
 Audio/Video Recordings: How will the Audio and or video recordings be used?
 Voluntary Participation: Do I have to participate in this study?
 Right to Withdraw from the study: Will I have to continue participation in the study?
 Contact Information: Who do I contact if I have any questions?



RESEARCH INVOLVING HUMAN PARTICIPANTS
EXEMPT APPLICATION

7. Discuss the importance of the knowledge that will result from your study (benefits to the field and to society) and what benefits will accrue to your participants (if any). Include information about participant compensation if appropriate.

The potential knowledge that will result from this study is to help understand the role of soft skills in African American women leaders ability to navigate barriers to corporate leadership. The implications of this study will raise awareness of the significant role of soft skills in African American women's ability to attain leadership roles. It will further alert African American women on the importance of cultivating soft skills.

There will be no compensation for this study.

8. Explain how your proposed study meets criteria for exemption from Institutional Review Board review (as outlined on page 2 of this form).

Minimal risks are associated with this study because participants will be interviewed. Precautionary measures will be taken to ensure confidentiality of the participants including pseudonyms, files will be kept on the researcher's hard drive and deleted at the conclusion of the study, recordings will be destroyed at the conclusion of the study. Psychological or social risks will be minimal because participants will be able to choose not to answer any questions if they feel uncomfortable. Participants will also have the right to withdraw from the study at any time.

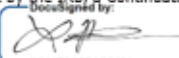


RESEARCH INVOLVING HUMAN PARTICIPANTS EXEMPT APPLICATION

SIGNATURE ASSURANCES

I understand Florida Institute of Technology's policy concerning research involving human participants, and I agree:

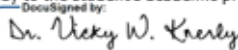
1. To accept responsibility for the scientific and ethical conduct of this research study.
2. To obtain prior approval from the Institutional Review Board before amending or altering the research protocol or implementing changes in the approved consent form.
3. To immediately report to the IRB any serious adverse reactions and/or unanticipated effects on subjects which may occur as a result of this study.
4. To complete, on request by the IRB, a Continuation Review form if the study exceeds its estimated duration.

Principal investigator's signature  Date 7/18/2022 7/20/2022
Principal investigator's name (print) Latoya Newell Burke

ADVISOR ASSURANCES

(If primary investigator is a student)

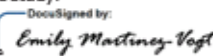
This is to certify that I have reviewed this research protocol and that I attest to the scientific merit of the study, the necessity for the use of human subjects in the study to the student's academic program and the competency of the student to conduct the project.

Major advisor's signature  Date 7/20/2022
Major advisor's name (print) Vicky W. Knerly, DBA

ACADEMIC UNIT HEAD

(It is the PI's responsibility to obtain this signature.)

This is to certify that I have reviewed this research protocol and that I attest to the scientific merit of this study and the competency of the investigator(s) to conduct the study.

Academic unit head's signature  Date 7/20/2022
Academic unit head's name (print) Emily Martinez-Vogt, PhD

FOR IRB USE ONLY

IRB approval _____ Date _____
IRB # _____

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APPENDIX B

Institutional Review Board Approval



Florida Institute of Technology
Institutional Review Board

Notice of Exempt Review Status Certificate of Clearance for Human Participants Research

Principal Investigator: Latoya Newell Burke

Date: August 08, 2022

IRB Number: 22-072

Study Title: "Exploring the significance of soft skills amongst African American women navigating barriers to achieve the C-suite"

Your research protocol was reviewed and approved by the IRB Chairperson. Per federal regulations, 45 CFR 46.101, your study has been determined to be minimal risk for human subjects and exempt from 45 CFR 46 federal regulations. The Exempt determination is valid indefinitely. Substantive changes to the approved exempt research must be requested and approved prior to their initiation. Investigators may request proposed changes by submitting a Revision Request form found on the IRB website.

Acceptance of this study is based on your agreement to abide by the policies and procedures of Florida Institute of Technology's Human Research Protection Program (<http://web2.fit.edu/crm/irb/>) and does not replace any other approvals that may be required.

All data, which may include signed consent form documents, must be retained in a secure location for a minimum of three years (six if HIPAA applies) past the completion of this research. Any links to the identification of participants should be maintained on a password-protected computer if electronic information is used. Access to data is limited to authorized individuals listed as key study personnel.

The category for which exempt status has been determined for this protocol is as follows:

2. Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if at least one of the following criteria is met:

- a. The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects cannot readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects; or
- b. Any disclosure of the human subjects' responses outside the research would not reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, educational advancement, or reputation; or
- c. The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects can readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects, and IRB can determine if there are adequate provisions in place to protect the privacy of the subjects and confidentiality of the data.

APPENDIX C

RECRUITMENT EMAIL

To Whom It May Concern:

I am Latoya Newell Burke, a Doctoral Student at Florida Institute of Technology. I am seeking your participation in my study entitled, "Exploring the significance of soft skills amongst African American women navigating barriers to achieving corporate leadership". I am seeking African American woman in a leadership role for at least 5 years within an organization.

As a participant, you will participate in an interview where you will share your experiences. During the interview you will be asked a series of questions regarding your experiences in your leadership role as an African American woman and how you have navigated those experiences, particularly pertaining to the barriers that you have faced. You will also be asked a series of questions pertaining to your use of soft skills during your corporate journey.

The initial interview will be no more than 1 to 1 ½ hours. You may then have a follow-up interview that will last between 30 minutes to 1 hour. You will also review the transcript of your interview, which will take you approximately 1 hour. The total time commitment for your participation will be approximately 2 ½ to 3 hours total.

If you agree to participate in this study, please respond to this email expressing your interest. I will then contact you to review and sign the informed consent. We will then set up an interview at a date, time, and method that is convenient for you. The interview will take place via phone, live, or virtual.
Thank you for your consideration in this matter.

Latoya Newell Burke
Lnewellburke@fit.edu
850-445-8641

APPENDIX D

FLORIDA INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY RESEARCH INVOLVING HUMAN PARTICIPANTS INFORMED CONSENT

Please read this consent document carefully before you decide to participate in this study. The researcher will answer any questions before you sign this form.

Introduction:

Latoya Newell Burke, a student at Florida Institute of Technology, is the primary researcher for this study under the direction of her Dissertation Chair, Dr. Vicky Knerly. You are invited to participate in this study as a part of Latoya's dissertation study. Your participation is strictly voluntary and you may choose not to participate.

Study Title:

"Exploring the role of soft leadership skills amongst African American women navigating barriers to achieving corporate leadership"

Purpose of the Study: Why is this Study Being Done?

You are being asked to participate in this study because you have identified yourself as an African American woman in a leadership role within your current organization who has aspirations of attaining a corporate leadership position. The purpose of this study will be to explore how African American women professionals utilize soft skills to navigate barriers to corporate leadership positions within an organization. This study will describe the common meaning and trends for African American professionals who have navigated barriers as they attempt to elevate.

Procedure of the Study: What is Involved in this Study?

If you choose to participate in this study. The following are the steps that will take place throughout this process:

1. You will complete a brief questionnaire of background information.
2. I will contact you to set up an interview at a date, time, and method that is convenient for you. The interview will take place via phone, live, or virtual.
3. Once we agree on a time and date, I will send you a calendar invite via email to confirm the appointment.
4. You will select a pseudonym to be used during the course of this study.
5. The initial interview will be no more than 1 hour. You will then have a follow-up interview that will last between 30 minutes to 1 hour. You will also review the transcript of your interview, which will take you approximately 1 hour. The total time commitment for your participation will be approximately 2 ½ to 3 hours total.

6. During the interview you will be asked a series of questions regarding your experiences in your leadership role as an African American woman and how you have navigated those experiences, particularly pertaining to the barriers that you have faced. You will also be asked a series of questions pertaining to your use of soft skills during your corporate journey.
7. I will take notes during the interview and I will also record the interview.
8. The interview will be transcribed and then coded according to themes using coding software.
You will have the opportunity to review the transcript to discuss the transcription of the interview to verify the transcript and the interpretation of the interview. There will also be an opportunity for a follow-up interview. During this time, we will discuss your input and discuss some of your experiences in more detail as needed.
9. I will perform an analysis of the information collected.
10. The results and findings will then be written in my final dissertation. In my final dissertation, I will not use your real name for your anonymity.
11. You will have the opportunity to review my final dissertation, upon request.

Potential Risks of Participating: What are the risks associated with this study?

There are no foreseeable potential physical risks associated with your participation in this study.

Compensation: Will I be compensated for my participation in this study?

You will not be compensated for participating in this study.

Confidentiality: How will my privacy be protected?

Your identity will be kept confidential to the extent provided by law. You will identify a pseudonym that will be used throughout the study and the organization you work for will not be identified.

- Your name will not be used in any report or future publications of this study. However, you may be quoted in the study using your pseudonym without reference to any information that may be used to identify you. The only person who will be aware of your identity will be the researcher.

The data collected will be kept by the and it will not be shared with others. Florida Institute of Technology will not release your information without your permission unless required by law. When the study is completed and the data has been analyzed, the audio recordings will be destroyed.

Voluntary Participation: Do I have to participate in this study?

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. There is no penalty for not participating. You may also refuse to answer any of the questions we ask you.

Right to Withdraw from the Study: Will I have to continue participation in this study?

You have the right to withdraw from the study at any time without consequence.

Contact Information: Who do I contact if I have any questions?

You can contact me, Latoya Newell Burke, lnewellburke@fit.edu, or my advisor, Dr. Vicky Knerly, vknerly@fit.edu.

If you have any questions regarding your rights as a participant in this study, you may contact:

Dr. Jignya Patel, IRB Chairperson
150 W. University Blvd., Melbourne, FL 32901-6975
FIT_IRB@fit.edu ; 321-674-7391

Agreement:

I have read the procedure described above. I voluntarily agree to participate in the procedure, and I have received a copy of this description.

Participant's
Signature _____ Date _____

Principal Investigator's Signature _____
Date _____

APPENDIX E

Demographic Questionnaire

Dissertation: "Exploring the role of soft skills amongst African American women navigating barriers to achieving corporate leadership"

Name(Pseudonym)	_____
Gender	_____
Ethnicity	_____
Highest Degree Obtained	_____
Job Title	_____
Level of Management	<input type="checkbox"/> Lower Level <input type="checkbox"/> Middle Level <input type="checkbox"/> Top Level
Type of Organization (Industry)	_____
Length of Time with Organization	_____
Length of time in Leadership	_____