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A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY EXPLORING THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF AFRICAN AMERICAN NON-PROFIT EXECUTIVES

By
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A DISSERTATION IN PRACTICE

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Abstract

In the past decade, the United States has grown increasingly diverse and as a result experienced continued growth in the number of non-profit organizations that provide vital services that strengthen society. Despite the increased need for services, there is a racial leadership gap in the non-profit sector, where leadership does not accurately reflect the populations that they serve. This is especially true for non-profit organizations that serve African Americans. A vast amount of literature demonstrates the influence of leadership training and development programs on nonprofit leadership, but there is a scarcity of research that examined African American non-profit leaders experiences. This phenomenological qualitative research study explored the lived experiences of African American executives in non-profit organizations to gain a deeper understanding of their unique challenges and identify strategies that may contribute to their success. To accomplish this goal, thirteen in-depth interviews were conducted with current and former executives from National Urban League affiliates. Five themes emerged from the analysis: (1) Most Impactful Early Experiences, (2) Leadership Characteristics Brought to Executive Positions, (3) Facilitators of Advancement to Executive Roles, (4) Challenges Encountered on the Path to Leadership, and (5) The Role of Ongoing Professional Development. These recommendations have the potential to foster diversity, equity, and inclusion and provide implications for future research on African American leadership in the non-profit sector.

Keywords: African American leadership, non-profit organizations, succession planning, professional development

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Qualitative interviews were conducted with former and current African American non-profit executives from National Urban League affiliates. The qualitative data captured from this study illuminated the challenges of African Americans during their executive leadership development process. The existing literature that describes the development of African American leadership began in the 1960s Civil Rights era, where African American men and women were recognized as effective leaders. For decades, minority leaders have emerged; however, there is a scarcity of research that examines the professional development of African American leaders. By using a phenomenological research approach, the lived experiences of African American nonprofit executives provides qualitative data that offers best practices for succession planning and professional development for African Americans seeking to serve in a non-profit executive capacity. This study focused on African American non-profit executives who currently serve or have served at a National Urban League affiliate within the past five years.

Illuminating the leadership journey from the perspectives of African American non-profit executives helped uncover how individuals construct the meaning of their human experiences within the layers of influence and assist with identifying future non-profit executives (Moerer-Urdahl & Creswell, 2004). This study sought to provide an internal view of these experiences, leadership characteristics, and resources for future non-profit executive officers. Guided by phenomenological research, this study was designed to ensure that lived experiences are represented while capturing the participants' true perspectives (Moustakas, 1994). This qualitative study not only contributed to the existing body of literature but also provided specific outcomes that highlighted the perspectives of this underrepresented group (Creswell & Creswell, 2018b).

Statement of the Problem

In the past decade, the United States has experienced continued growth in the number of non-profit organizations, growing by 10.4% from 2005 to 2015 (McKeever, 2018). Additionally, the non-profit sector

has become more complex. Non-profit organizations play a growing role in the United States' social and economic well-being by providing a diverse mix of services, goods, and resources to meet community needs. Non-profit organizations historically demonstrated a more complex set of expectations regarding the importance of leadership versus managerial skills than their for-profit organization counterparts (Drucker, 1990; Hesselbein, 2004). The expectations for non-profit leaders have also changed, with the focus being on difficult issues such as the sharp decline in funding for human services programs, outcome measurement, accountability, and transparency (Harrison et al., 2018). As a result, this study focused its interviews on African American leaders in the non-profit arena to determine their leadership commonalities. Non-profit organizations that serve and are led by African Americans are vital to delivering diverse human services and advocacy, even when they face more conflict and struggles with equity and diversity than their white counterparts (Thomas-Breitfeld et al., n.d.).

The phenomenon of the lack of African Americans in executive positions in non-profit organizations merited further examination due to the scarcity of research studies. It was critical to address this phenomenon and lack of evidence-based tools and to inform leaders of resources to support African American non-profit executive leadership development and retention. With 75% of the United States leaders planning to withdraw, within the next five years, from non-profit and philanthropic institutions, the implication of the expected turnover is enormous (Kunreuther et al., 2014; Lord et al., 2017).

As a result of this leadership trend, filling leadership vacancies remained the number one organizational concern of United States non-profit organizations (Landles-Cobb et al., 2015). Additionally, the non-profit sector is experiencing a racial leadership gap. As the United States becomes increasingly diverse, the percentage of people of color in Executive Director/ Chief Executive Officers roles remained under 20% for the last 15 years (Thomas-Breitfeld et al., n.d.). Non-profit organizations that serve and are led by African Americans are vital to the delivery of diverse human services, advocacy, and strengthening

civil society (De Vita & Fleming, 2001). Understanding the specific leadership characteristics of African American Chief Executive Officers in non-profit organizations could reveal new ways of solving the leadership crisis in the non-profit sector.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological dissertation in practice study was to explore the lived experiences of African American executives in non-profit organizations relevant to their advancement, influences, and leadership characteristics. Through qualitative phenomenology, this study explored the lived experiences of African American non-profit executives. The study also provided leaders with insight on the leadership characteristics needed to retain and recruit African American non-profit executives because of the scarcity of research studies addressing this phenomenon. There were limited resources of evidence-based tools that inform leaders of prevalent assets to support the development and retention of African American non-profit executive leadership. This study provided leaders with insight into the leadership characteristics needed to retain and recruit African American non-profit executives. Understanding these barriers and finding solutions helps provide best practices for planning and professional development for African Americans seeking to serve in an executive capacity for non-profit organizations.

Research Question

The following research question guided this qualitative study: What lived experiences influence the leadership advancement of African American non-profit executives?

Aim of the Dissertation in Practice

This dissertation in practice aimed to offer guidance to African Americans who aspire to serve in executive capacities within non-profit organizations. Using a phenomenological research design, the lived experiences of African American non-profit executives provided qualitative data that offered best practices

for succession planning and professional developments for African Americans seeking to serve in a non-profit executive capacity. This study focused on African American non-profit executives who currently serve or have served at a National Urban League affiliate within the past five years. Illuminating the leadership journey from the perspectives of current and former African American non-profit executives helped uncover how individuals construct the meaning of their human experiences within the layers of influence. The study also assisted with identifying future non-profit executives (Moerer-Urdahl & Creswell, 2004) and provided an internal view of their experiences, leadership advancement, and identified African American specific leadership professional development resources for non-profit organizations.

Definition of Relevant Terms

The word executive can represent a variety of positions, functions, and contexts within a non-profit organization. The following terms were used throughout the study:

Executive: a President, Vice President, or C-Suite Executive in charge of a principal business unit, division, or function (such as operations, finance, impact), any other officer who performs a decision-making function, or any other person who performs similar decision-making functions for the issuer. A person who holds senior managerial authority in a business or organization and is the leader of the business or organization (Cook & Glass, 2014).

Non-profit Organization (NPO): an organization that is not intended to make a profit, especially one set up to provide a public service (Collins English Dictionary, 2018).

Methodology Overview

Phenomenological research guided this study to ensure that lived experiences were represented, while capturing the participants' true perspectives (Moustakas, 1994). This qualitative study not only added to the existing body of literature, but it also provided specific outcomes that gave a voice to this underrepresented group (Moree, 2018). Creswell (2007) informed that phenomenological studies are about

the lived experiences of several individuals. The goal of qualitative phenomenological research is to describe the lived experience of a phenomenon (Giorgi et al., 2017). Phenomenology was utilized to identify the meaning of individuals' lived experiences, related to a specific phenomenon, and then helped to develop a composite description of the phenomenon (Creswell & Creswell, 2018b). To collect data, African American non-profit executives, who currently serve or have served within the past 5 years, participated in a semi-structured interview consisting of twelve (12) leadership-related questions. Creswell et al. (2007) state that the qualitative phenomenological research method describes what participants have in common, as they experience a phenomenon, rather than generate a theoretical model. For qualitative research methodology to be appropriate, Creswell and Creswell (2018b) insist that participants must have an interest in the research process that leads to outcomes, while quantitative research has an interest in the outcome and does not identify the experiences and circumstances leading to the outcomes. I took five steps to analyze the collected data: 1) transcription, 2) coding and synthesis, 3) deduce categories, and 4) identify common themes and make interpretations.

Delimitations, Limitations, and Personal Biases

A delimitation of this study was its scope being limited to non-profit executives serving or having served within National Urban League affiliates. Therefore, the findings may not have been applicable to non-profit organizations outside of the demographic parameters of the study site. Specifically, these organizations belonged to a unified network that independently governed and implemented direct human and social services and programs in urban cities. These operational dynamics might not apply to non-profit organizations catering to the minority demographic or those not offering direct human services. Moreover, the study's focus on African American non-profit executives may have limited its applicability to executives of other ethnicities.

An important limitation to address was the participants' ability to fully articulate their leadership experiences. Participants were asked to reflect upon and describe their leadership styles, motivations,

progression, and attributes. Furthermore, my role as a researcher and relationship with the participants could have posed another potential limitation. The participants were aware of my position as a non-profit executive officer, putting me in a dual role of peer and interviewer. This might have caused the participants to refrain from providing entirely candid responses, choosing to underscore only the positive aspects of their non-profit and leadership experiences. To mitigate this, I provided participants with a disclaimer encouraging them not to alter behaviors or responses to fit any preconceived notion. Measures to maintain confidentiality were also communicated to the participants. Additionally, the study's duration could potentially have limited its scope. Although the interviews and observations were thorough and allowed for follow-up, they occurred over a restricted period, potentially affecting the study's validity and my ability to conduct triangulation.

Researchers may carry personal perspectives about a problem that may compromise their objectivity but having a personal stake in an issue can also foster passion and dedication in their research work (Machi & McEvoy, 2016). As an African American non-profit executive officer within a National Urban League Affiliate, I acknowledged the potential for personal bias in this study. To manage such bias, I used a bracketing tool recommended by Qualitative Mind (2020) to identify potential sources of bias. This tool assisted in evaluating the research and study design more critically. To further minimize personal bias, I conducted member-checking with the interviewees. This process provided the interviewees with an opportunity to verify the accuracy of the information collected, with amendments being made, as necessary.

Reflections of the Scholar-Practitioner

Current non-profit executives have significant hurdles in leading day-to-day operations while simultaneously planning for the future of the company. With gaps in research, and a lack of evidence-based strategies, research that supports non-profit succession current leaders must implement planning. Succession planning helps to recruit diverse leaders and sustain organizational impact. Educational leaders who have an understanding on how to inspire, identify, nurture the development of, and train African Americans to assume executive leadership within non-profits, may influence the educational outcomes for this

demographic. Educational leaders who have gained a better understanding of their influence and role will ultimately result in more African Americans being trained to assume executive leadership positions. Those executive leadership positions are especially impactful in an industry with challenges retaining and identifying leaders amidst a shortage of non-profit executive leaders and African American non-profit executive officers.

Summary

Chapter One established the current African American leadership phenomenon in the nonprofit sector and provided insight into how non-profit organizations can increase the number of African Americans who become non-profit executive officers. Through phenomenological interviews of non-profit African American leadership characteristics, this research study sought to fill gaps in current African American leadership research, contributed to evidence-based strategies and research that support non-profit succession planning. Contributing to an under-researched practice of succession planning, chapter one informed of the research question, aim of the study, and the phenomenological methodology used. The remaining chapters of this dissertation outline the relevant literature on the topics of African American leadership, non-profit organizations, and leadership styles (Chapter Two), the methodology of this phenomenological study (Chapter Three), findings of the study (Chapter Four), and proposed solutions and implications recommendations (Chapter Five).

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter provided a literature review relevant to non-profit organizations, leadership, transformational leadership, motivation, lived experiences of leaders, succession planning and turnover in non-profit organizations. The first section of literature provided information on non-profit organizations in the United States and the role non-profit organizations play in communities. This literature demonstrated how scarce research is when pertaining to diversity and its impact on African American executives. My goal was to provide literature that demonstrates the significant impact non-profit organizations have on minorities and underserved areas.

The second section contained a review of the importance of leadership and its role in developing relationships that motivate, encourage, and foster the growth and development of lower-level colleagues to move toward an executive position. It focused on traditional leadership characteristics and included relevant literature on transformational leadership. The literature reviewed in this section explored the effect of role transformation leadership and leadership motivations on non-profit leaders. It explored how important a leader's vision and mission for the company are in creating support and "buy in" from all stakeholders. This section also addressed the many challenges of being a transformational leader and how exacerbated those challenges were when being a person of color. This section also discussed the historical role of African American leadership, particularly in civil rights movements and community-based non-profits presenting the social and political challenges faced by African American leaders and the systemic historical barriers African American leaders have had to overcome.

The final section of literature also explored turnover and succession planning in non-profit organizations. The emphasis in this section was on the scarcity of research regarding the theoretical framework of non-profit organizations. The goal was to indicate the various elements of maintaining and recruiting African Americans in the executive roles, sustaining that position, and providing professional

development that would allow those individuals to be successful. Hearing the lived experiences of people who serve in that role provided insight into the challenges and successes they experienced. The qualitative research sought to identify resources that would provide those entering executive positions to maintain success at the highest levels of non-profit organizations. Eradicating turnover and ensuring longevity is critical to the success of any executive, but it is critical for people of color. These were the individuals who were drastically underrepresented in literature and research. This study sought to help provide that information.

Non-Profit Organizations

Non-profit organizations (NPOs) have played a significant role in addressing social, economic, and environmental challenges throughout history. These organizations, also known as not-for-profit organizations, are structured to serve public interest rather than accumulate wealth for shareholders or owners. Non-profit organizations are incorporated entities that experience similar financial and operational concerns as both public and private organizations. The purpose of non-profit organizations originated through fulfilling a mission that focuses on furthering a social cause or a shared goal rather than gaining profits (Schild, 2021). Non-profit organizations provide opportunities for people to work together for the common good and transform shared beliefs and hopes into action (Nonprofit impact in communities, n.d.). According to the National Center for Charitable Statistics (n.d.), there are more than 1.5 million non-profit organizations in the United States with missions to feed, heal, shelter, educate, inspire, enlighten, and nurture people of every age, gender, race, and socioeconomic status. Non-profits play a fundamental role in creating equitable and thriving communities.

The Emergence of Non-Profit Organizations

The roots of non-profit organizations can be traced back to medieval Europe, where religious institutions and charitable organizations were formed to provide social welfare services (Hall, 2016). The development of NPOs accelerated during the industrial revolution, as rapid urbanization and social change

necessitated innovative approaches to address emerging problems. In the United States, the legal framework for non-profit organizations was formalized in the 20th century with the introduction of the Internal Revenue Code Section 501(c), which granted tax-exempt status to eligible organizations (Hopkins, 2020). This landmark legislation allowed NPOs to flourish, diversifying into various sectors such as education, health, and environmental conservation.

Non-profit organizations are distinct from their for-profit counterparts in several keyways. NPOs are primarily focused on advancing a particular social, cultural, or environmental mission, rather than generating profit for shareholders (Salamon & Anheier, 1997). They rely on a combination of funding sources, such as donations, grants, and earned income, to sustain their operations. Furthermore, NPOs often involve volunteer labor, community engagement, and collaboration with other organizations to achieve their goals. The purpose of NPOs is to address societal challenges, promote positive change, and enhance the well-being of communities or specific populations (Frumkin, 2002). This is achieved through a wide range of activities, including education, healthcare, social services, environmental conservation, and arts and culture programming, among others. As a sector, non-profit organizations play a crucial role in fostering social cohesion, promoting civic engagement, and enhancing societal resilience (Hansmann, 1980). Thus, the leadership within these organizations carries the weight of these social responsibilities while striving to balance sustainability and mission advancement.

Leadership Phenomenon

Leadership is a complex phenomenon that continues to be one of the most observed and least understood concepts on Earth (Block, 2014; Burns, 1978). Due to its fluid nature, leadership has been defined and redefined depending on the field of study and application. Leadership theories and individual leadership characteristics have also been studied and critiqued to varying degrees. Leadership theory focuses on determining how leaders excel in their roles, while leadership characteristics focus on the style of the leader and how they interact with their colleagues. Ciulla (2002) provides an all-encompassing definition of

leadership, defining leadership as a relationship between leaders and followers where one person emerges as the "leader" and the other person the "follower." Research on leadership has resulted in central themes of influence and power, with both focal points being a common thread.

The pace of leadership theory development has progressed slowly (Yukl, 2002), yet over the last two decades, significant advances have been made within the integration of leadership theories and human development (Cook-Greuter, 2002; Wilber, 2000). The first leadership theory established by Thomas Carlyle was the Great Man Theory, which focused on leadership as an inherent set of qualities that enabled effective leadership. Carlyle's view on leadership was challenged as researcher Ralph Stogdill (1948) studied leadership characteristics and traits, concluding that possessing specific leadership and characteristics does not lead to successful and effective leadership.

Leadership has developed into theories of behavior, contingency, and situational theories that focus on leadership behaviors, power dimensions, traits, skills, and situational contexts. Rather than a specific context, these various aspects of leadership afford new emerging research areas that recognize leadership as a collective phenomenon and as an individual's thoughts, inquiries, perceptions, values, and actions in a community. These can be defined, but not limited to, Power of Position, Power of Charisma, Power of Relationships, and the Power of Expertise (Leading Effectively Staff, 2021).

Influence and Power Related to Non-Profit Leadership

Power in leadership is normally limited to a few individuals within an organization. There is a plethora of examples to demonstrate the misuse of power, but in this section, the focus will be on the strength of power and how it can help to transform a non-profit organization into a powerful entity. We will focus on a few of the "powers" that can elevate leadership, especially among minorities who are underrepresented in these positions. The first is the power of Position. This power stems directly from the position or title held by an authoritative figure within an organization (Leading Effectively Staff, 2021). Within this power comes great responsibility and can be extremely helpful or detrimental to a company.

Leadership comes with great power, and when others feel empowered, motivated, and driven by the vision and mission of the leader, companies can experience great success (Leading Effectively Staff, 2021).

The Power of Charisma is the influence driven by the excitement exuded by those who lead. It creates a positive climate within an organization's culture and maintains the joy individuals have and the pride they feel within their positions. It is important for a leader to demonstrate this style as it often supports leadership theories about fostering an enjoyable and motivating workplace for employees. Having this quality in a non-profit sector, and being exhibited by minority leaders, can increase the chances of sustainability and success (Leading Effectively Staff, 2021).

The power of relationships is another style of leadership that encourages motivation and excitement in the workplace. Understanding the individuals within a corporation, as well as diverse cultural elements help to build diversity and equity. It also stands to assist with eradicating implicit biases within the workplace, allowing an understanding of differences and fostering all the elements and expertise each individual can bring to the corporation to make a difference.

The final example of the role of power in leadership is the power of expertise (Leading Effectively Staff, 2021). People believe more in a person who is knowledgeable and an expert in their area. It allows for the buy-in within a mission and vision when a leader can demonstrate their knowledge and expertise in their role. This power is extremely influential and can potentially dominate the other examples of power because a leader exudes their knowledge and can help push those who follow (Leading Effectively Staff, 2021). These powers help to elevate that leadership and serve as various characteristics needed in leaders to help transform companies and move potential leaders to the top level of their careers.

Non-Profit Leadership

Non-profit leadership is important for several reasons, as it plays a crucial role in the overall functioning, effectiveness, and impact of non-profit organizations. Non-profit leaders focus on difficult issues like the sharp decline in funding for human service programming, outcome measurement,

accountability, and transparency (Harrison et al., 2018). The role of a non-profit organizational leader is to implement programs fostering a healthier community. Nonprofit leadership is a distinctive and critical component for the successful operation of organizations within the voluntary sector (Herman & Renz, 2008). Unlike for-profit entities, the driving force behind nonprofit organizations is their mission to serve the public good, as opposed to the maximization of shareholder value (Anheier, 2014). Hence, the leaders of these organizations encounter unique challenges, including managing resource constraints, developing partnerships with a diverse array of stakeholders, and cultivating a culture centered on volunteerism and philanthropy (Pfeffer & Salancik, 2003). Therefore, successful nonprofit leadership necessitates a nuanced comprehension of the organization's mission, values, and objectives, in addition to the capacity to inspire, motivate, and empower team members to collaboratively strive towards a shared goal (Northouse, 2018).

One integral aspect of nonprofit leadership involves the implementation of strategic planning and organizational development to guarantee the long-term sustainability and impact of the organization (Bryson, 2018). Leaders within the nonprofit sector must exhibit proficiency in identifying both opportunities and threats in the external environment, along with assessing internal organizational strengths and weaknesses (Gazley, 2010). This requires the utilization of an array of strategic planning tools, including but not limited to SWOT analysis, scenario planning, and logic models, in order to create a comprehensive roadmap for the achievement of the organization's mission (Bryson, 2018). Additionally, nonprofit leaders are tasked with fostering an environment conducive to continuous learning, where feedback is embraced and adjustments are made in response to changing circumstances, thus ensuring the continued relevance and efficacy of the organization's programs and services (Kaplan, 2001). The executive director of a non-profit organization has many roles and responsibilities that they must perform. To be effective, an executive director must execute all their responsibilities equally, paying attention to the company's various aspects. At any given moment, an executive director must be able to switch roles according to the direct needs of the

organization (Barlow, 2017). The role of a non-profit executive director entails the following but is not limited to leadership, management, fundraising, communications, planning, strategizing, marketing, and problem-solving. Leadership styles have a significant impact on how well executive directors carry out their duties. Committed executive directors evaluate their own leadership styles and seek input from others (Barlow, 2017).

Evolution of African American Leadership in the United States

African American leadership in non-profits can be traced back to 1957 when civil rights movements were formed to fight for the rights of African Americans. To promote further civil rights for African Americans, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference was formed in 1957 under the guidance of the Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. (Britannica, 2024). The Civil Rights Act of 1957 prompted the federal government to take action and establish measures that would prevent any citizen regardless of their racial background from being denied the right to vote. During the spring of 1961, in Alabama and Mississippi, the Congress of Racial Equality under the national director, James Farmer, organized freedom rides to defy segregation activities on interstate buses (Abdelzaher & Latheef, 2023; Britannica, 2024). To further promote rights for African Americans, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was established to forbid discrimination in employment, public accommodation, and voting (Britannica, 2024; Moore-Dunson, 2023). This Act allowed the attorney general of the United States to deny funding to local or state agencies that engaged in discrimination against African Americans. To increase voter participation by African Americans, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was ratified through the Twenty-fourth Amendment of the U.S. Constitution.

In 1965 there was an emergence of African American leadership when African American organizations such as the Black Panther Party, Revolutionary Action Movement and Deacons of Defense. These movements were under the leadership of African American leaders Stokely Carmichael and Rap Brown who were arrested and fled the country, leading to the loss of African American leadership that in

turn weakened the organizations (Verney, 2024). However, the Black Power movement was established by Malcolm X in 1965 which advocated for African American professionals including the demand for African American teachers and leaders in African American dominated organizations (Britannica, 2024; Kuperman, 2024). The demand for African American leadership was prompted by the upsurge of African American culture and creativity of African Americans and the need for community-based organizations for African Americans.

By 1970, civil rights movements marked a significant shift in emphasis on legislative objectives which were largely attained and more African Americans were allowed to hold leadership and employment positions in various organizations and movements. During this time, African Americans attained notable benefits such as educational opportunities and rise into leadership as well as upper-middle class status (Taylor, 2021). From the 1970s, African Americans were elected to political leadership positions and other leadership in different organizations and community-based movements. This gave rise to more African Americans getting opportunities to hold leadership positions in federal government offices and non-profit organizations (Watson, 2022). To date, civil rights movements have advocated for the rights of African Americans to secure equal treatment in education, housing, and employment. Therefore, African American leadership has played a significant role in ensuring the rights of African Americans are granted and achieved and this has seen tremendous growth and progress in leadership among African Americans in the United States (Dierenfield, 2021; Lynn, 2023).

Social and Political Challenges Faced by African American Leaders

Historical Slavery

The history of slavery has been a challenge for African American leaders. Research shows that historical slavery contributed to increased discrimination of African Americans as the law was amended to favor the slave masters who were in roles of authority with modern titles such as Judge (Smith, 2021). Such

historical slavery events have been transmitted across generations as evidenced by unequal treatment of African American people who are racially discriminated and most times the authority is staffed by white supremacists who perceived African Americans as their property. Jim Crow laws led to the continuation of social injustices faced by slaves of African origin. This leads to increased discrimination against African Americans who are perceived as their slave ancestors, and this contributes to racial segregation (Logan & Temin, 2020). Related findings were reported in a qualitative study conducted by Ward (2022) who revealed that the Jim Crow laws are the major cause of increased discrimination and unfair treatment of African Americans in the United States. According to Ward (2022), Jim Crow laws institutionalized segregation and discrimination of people of color in the war against drugs targeting minority communities who were unjustly treated through mass incarceration with harsh sentencing.

Systemic racism has also been identified as a result of unjust laws institutionalized and rooted in Jim Crow laws contributing to social and political injustices including the denial of leadership opportunities to African Americans (Ward, 2022). Systemic racism and biases hinder African American leaders from asserting their leadership obligations and responsibilities in non-profit organizations. Thus, historical injustices exacerbated by Jim Crow laws and the legacy of slavery have affected African American leaders in their access to leadership opportunities in performing their leadership roles becoming an additional challenge to overcome to attain leadership positions in non-profit organizations.

The lack of political power

People of color were denied the opportunity to vote for their leaders who could advocate for their rights as African Americans. This indicates that leadership responsibilities were a reserve of the majority of Whites who had the freedom to elect their leaders, hold leadership positions, and be allowed to vote compared to African Americans who had no right to vote (Jones, 2021). African Americans had no representatives in political leadership who could fight for their rights as the civil rights movement was

sometimes not strong enough to advocate for their rights, leading to continuous exclusion from important national events such as voting power to their preferred leaders (Portillo et al., 2021). Yet, reconstruction of civil rights through the 14th and 15th amendment gave African American people a glimpse of democracy in the United States but was later replaced with the suppression and discrimination of African Americans, leading to a racially divisive nation that denied African Americans leadership opportunities (Shepherd & Pritzker, 2021). African American leaders who challenged unjust laws such as Jim Crow laws were brutally resisted such as Martin Luther King Jr. who fought for equality as he wanted African Americans to receive equal treatment in all areas of life in the United States (Rose, 2022).

Unlawful Arrests and Assassinations

One of the challenges faced by African American leaders is unlawful arrest and assassinations. African American civil rights leaders faced social and political challenges including unlawful arrests and assassinations while advocating for the rights of African American people in the United States (Iheme, 2022). African American leaders were perceived as a threat to law and order as a result of increased protests and violence against the unfair laws and increased discrimination against African American people. Many African Americans were unlawfully arrested and killed, contributing to increased fear among some African American leaders who fled the country or disbanded the civil rights movement (Iheme, 2020). The assassination of African American leaders and reformists who advocated for the rights of African American people contributed to limited leadership opportunities for African Americans as some African American leaders succumbed to such threats and intimidations (Alfred, 2021). One of the most notable African American leaders who was assassinated for standing up for African American civil rights was Martin Luther King Jr. who was assassinated on the 4th of April 1968 in Memphis, Tennessee, United States (Gritter, 2023). These political and social challenges had to be overcome by African American leaders who aimed to

advocate for the rights of African American people as well as offer community services through non-profit organizations to help African American people with essential services.

Suppression of civil rights movements

Another challenge that African American leaders had to overcome was the suppression of civil rights movements. In the view of Alfred (2021), the majority of the civil rights movement established by African American leaders were suppressed as their leaders were either assassinated or forced to flee the country into exile to avoid assassination. However, those leaders who were steadfast and fearless of the intimidation managing to sustain some civil rights movements which advocated for the rights of African Americans amid intimidation (Gritter, 2023). African American leaders such as Malcolm X, Martin Luther King Jr. and Corretta Scott King, maintained their stance and resilience towards achieving freedom for African Americans despite their assassination attempts that eventually happened (Michel, 2021). Despite being assassinated, these African American leaders had to overcome or face such obstacles for the rights of African Americans as their efforts and resolve were successful as African Americans started accessing rights to vote and participate in leadership including becoming president of the United States as evidenced by former president Barrack Obama (Hunt et al., 2021). The lived experiences of African American leaders further illuminate the struggles and challenges that African American leaders had to overcome to be leaders in various organizations and state agencies in the United States.

Transformational Leadership

Behavioral theory transformed the field of leadership in the same way that transformational leadership, first introduced by Burns (1985), changed the study of leadership. Transformational leadership explains a process of how leaders and followers help each other advance to a higher level of morale and motivation. Burns further informed readers that through transformational leadership, followers could be inspired to change their expectations, perceptions, and motivations in order to work together to accomplish

common goals. Bass (1985) expanded upon Burn's original theory by defining transformational leadership as a style of leadership in which the leader identifies the needed change, creates a vision to guide the change through inspiration, and executes the change with the commitment of the members of the group.

Transformational leaders encourage their followers to think outside the box and challenge their followers' assumptions by empowering them with individualized mentoring and coaching (Becker et al., 2021). Carter et al. (2013) investigated the connection between change at higher leadership levels, and the relationships amongst transformational leadership, change reaction, frequency, and consequences. Transformational leadership was related to employees' performance (i.e., task performance and organizational change behavior), through the relationship quality developed between managers and employees (2013). Leaders' attributes influence the choices and decisions they make in the organization, which influence followers' attitudes and beliefs (Berson et al., 2008; Schein, 1992; Schneider, 1987). Transformational leaders possess the ability to effectively communicate a clear vision for their organization. They act as role models for employees by sharing their values, discussing the importance of their roles, and taking actions that demonstrate a commitment to addressing problems.

Theoretical Frameworks on Leadership and Identity

James McGregor Burns (1978) studied and presented on leadership and the concept of transforming leaders in his book on leadership. In his work, Burns (1978) developed one important idea in leaders by stating that transforming leadership is idealized in a working environment and happens when leaders and their employees collaborate and help one another to elevate levels of motivation and satisfaction.

The concept of transformational leadership was first presented by Burns (1978) based on a qualitative study of the actions and behaviors of political leaders. In his study, James McGregor Burns (1978) established that effective leadership needs leaders who possess the capability to create a vision and goals to convince their staff to be part of that vision and goals. Further, Bass and Brown (1993) extended transformational leadership research as part of the three essential styles in their multifactorial leadership

model. Bass and Brown (1993) labelled transformational leadership in two ways including authentic transformational leaders who motivate their employees or followers to work for inspirational vision and objectives that are beyond immediate self-interest. This relies on the notion that what is good and right becomes important for both the leader and the follower. Another aspect of transformational leadership according to Bass and Brown (1993) is transformational leaders who influence followers or employees to transcend their self-interest for the good of the group or organization as they are more concerned with the well-being of others than their self-interests. As a result, a transformational leader inspires employees or followers and other constituencies to perform more than they were expected to perform as they endeavor to higher-order results (Bass & Avolio, 1993). The transformational leadership model has four major components including individualized consideration, intellectual stimulation, inspirational motivation, and idealized influence.

In the concept of individualized consideration, a transformational leader is judged based on the extent to which the leader listens to and addresses the concerns of every employee or staff at an individual capacity (Gooden et al., 2020). Such considerations at individual levels allow the leader to establish a personal interaction and connection with every employee (Scott, 2022). African American leaders may use this element to promote individual considerations of volunteer staff through engagement and offering professional development opportunities based on unindividual unique needs of each employee in non-profit organizations.

The second concept of the transformational leadership model is intellectual stimulation. This concept comprises the leader challenging and motivating the employee to develop innovativeness and creativity in their actions. Therefore, a transformational leader can inspire staff to think critically and create innovative and important ideas to help in executing their duties (Bass & Brown, 1993). African American leaders in non-profits can inspire their volunteer staff to be innovative and creative by promoting cooperation and teamwork among employees and leaders which may lead to improved performance of different projects

initiated by the Non-profit organization (Davis et al., 2022). Brooks (2022) established that African American leaders who use transformational leadership style have demonstrated improvement in employee performance and creativity and that led to more donations to their non-profit organizations due to a positive public image of trust and transparency.

The third element of the transformational leadership model is inspirational motivation. The concept of inspirational motivation refers to a leader who creates a vision and goals for the organization and articulates this vision to the employees or staff to create awareness about the visions and what is expected of them (Bass & Brown, 1993). As inspirational leaders, African American leaders are required to create a vision for the non-profits and articulate the vision to the employees to understand what is needed to achieve the vision and goals (Apugo, 2021). Inspirational motivation can portray the African American leader as someone who values the employee's decisions and views about how to achieve the vision (Bass & Brown, 1993). In return, employees will be willing to invest more time and effort in attaining the vision and objectives of the organization.

The last element of the transformational leadership model is the concept of idealized influence. Transformational leaders act as role models of positive influence to their followers and are regarded as morally upright leaders. These leaders incite their followers to develop ethical conduct or behaviors that enhance their commitment to attaining the organization’s vision and goals (Van-Dick & Monzani, 2020). This concept of idealized influence may help African American leaders to consider positive behaviors that can positively influence their staff in non-profit organizations (Bass & Brown, 1993). These leaders have an open-door communication policy for employees which promotes frequent and candid feedback during communication. Research shows that the transformational leadership style improves staff's emotional connectedness and moral identities which leads to improvement in their moral behaviors and decision-making abilities (Denton, 2020; Magny,2021). Overall, transformational leaders are inclusive and consider every employee’s unique needs and skills developed for enhanced motivation.

The second theory that will guide this study is the theory of servant leadership which originated from Greenleaf (1977). Greenleaf (1977) explained that positive leadership practices start with the yearning to serve others rather than being served. By others. In servant leadership, an individual grows into a leader through excellent services of work history with positive values including altruism, compassion and empathy (Greenleaf, 1977). In 2003, this theory of servant leadership was further advanced by Patterson, who noted that all leaders fall between being employee-centered and being leader-centered.

Further research indicated that leader-centered leaders are only concerned with the selfish interests of their urge to access power and control over situations including controlling their followers. In advancing the servant leadership model, Tran and Spears (2020) identified four elements of servant leadership such as humility, altruism, trustworthiness, and the ability to empower employees. In previous research, Tran and Spears (2020) established that servant leadership is a style that is often based on positive values such as humility, altruism, empathy, and the capacity to encourage staff. As servant leaders, African American leaders in non-profits can foster a positive organizational environment enhance employee motivation, and job satisfaction, and improve organizational identity (Franco & Antunes, 2020). The servant leadership style can help African American leaders to effectively lead in a challenging environment characterized by increased discrimination. However, a leader-centered selfish interest by servant leaders may not promote positive behaviors among followers.

Unlike servant leadership in which leaders can serve their selfish interests, transformational leadership can be more effective for African American leadership in non-profits. The model of transformational leadership is only an employee-centered approach whose objective is to motivate and empower followers to serve the interests of the organization and employees (Davis et al., 2022). A transformational leader following this approach can collaboratively work with employees to obligate to a common vision and objectives for the organization, promoting innovation and creativity among employees as they strive to pursue those goals (Brooks, 2022). The aspect of collaboration and employee engagement

may help African American leaders in nonprofits enhance volunteer staff retention and performance as well as promote positive engagement with donors or financiers of the Non-profit projects (Gooden et al., 2020). Yet, servant leadership lacks the element of collaboration and teamwork with employees through staff engagement (Tran & Spears, 2020). These contrasts show the need for African American leaders to embrace both transformational leadership and servant leadership for effective management in non-profit organizations. The models of transformational leadership and servant leadership will be used to guide this study.

Motivation

Transformational leaders might also motivate employees by providing an image of a future where work activities are more sustainable, talking about what the employees must do to create this future, and conveying confidence in employees' capabilities (Graves et al., 2013). House's (2004) definition of leadership speaks to the role of leadership and of leaders who must have the ability to influence, motivate, and enable others to contribute toward the effectiveness and success of their followers. An additional topic that has received considerable attention in a wide array of leadership and management discussions is motivation because leadership and motivation are primarily connected (Schaffer, 2008). House's definition highlights the fact that motivation is a significant component of leadership, and without the ability to motivate followers, leaders face an efficiency and impact reduction.

Lived Experiences of Leaders

Lived experience is defined as personal knowledge about the world gained through direct, first-hand involvement in everyday events, rather than through representations constructed by other people (Chalker et al., 2014). The experience of leadership through individuals who experience the phenomenon, provides a critical understanding of the realities of practice (Landry, 2011). Lived experiences shape leaders and have a profound effect on their worldview. Great leaders are either a result of strong leadership experiences, or vice versa (Hallenbeck, 2017). Rising inequalities threaten our society and provide a sense of hopelessness,

which has remained the focus of social sector discussions about the future of organizations and the non-profit sector.

Understanding the lived experience of leaders will help with the reconceptualization of leadership practices (Landry, 2011). Sandhu (2019) cautions and discusses past practices that celebrate stories of leaders with lived experience. However, today, most people receiving social innovation education and accessing leadership opportunities within the wider sector are working to solve problems they have not experienced. Additionally, Ashikali et al. (2020) describe the historical recognition and respect experience, but also call for leadership to be more in sync with the larger, more diverse society in hopes that lived experiences are more meaningfully and equitably valued.

Non-Profit Executive Turnover

Grusky (1960) defined non-profit executive turnover as the most important turnover an organization will face. Even with the growth in positions within non-profit organizations, turnover is still a hindrance to service delivery. With 75% of United States non-profit leaders planning to leave their position within the next five years, and more than a million non-profit and philanthropic institutions across the country, the implications of the expected turnover are enormous (Kunreuther et al., 2014; Lord et al., 2017). Research regarding non-profit executive turnover is limited because researchers have paid more attention to executive turnover in the public and for-profit sectors (Selden & Sowa, 2015). United States non-profit organizations had higher employee turnover rates than other types of organizations and were challenged to retain qualified staff. In non-profit organizations, employee turnover has direct, negative consequences on efficiency, productivity, and employee morale (Nonprofit HR, 2021). For non-profit organizations that rely on employees to provide direct services, the consequences of turnover tend to take a more significant toll.

Challenges Faced by African American Non-Profit Leaders

Structural Racism and Leadership

African American non-profit leaders are faced with the challenge of limited access to funding due to implicit bias in grant process. This limited funding is attributed to increased structural racism in which most African American-led non-profits are not given priority due to a perceived lack of trustworthiness by the donors and philanthropic foundations (Abramovitz & Zelnick, 2022). Research indicates that African American leaders in non-profit organizations have found it challenging to access or woo donors to finance various African American-related projects (Darmanin, 2021). As a result, most donors prefer non-profit organizations for Whites due to increased trustworthiness and the objectives that align with the donors 'values in terms of racial affiliations. According to Fix and Atnafou-Boyer (2022), many African American-led non-profits face implicit bias from the decision makers when processing grants for non-profits while offering adequate financial support to non-profit organizations belonging to the Whites. As a result, African American leaders are offered limited opportunities to access grants to serve their communities in serious times of need. Thus, non-profit organizations led by African Americans are racially discriminated and denied important funding opportunities.

Insufficient networking opportunities for African American leaders can limit their access to large donor foundations. In one study to explore racism and funding of African American non-profit organizations, inadequate networking opportunities were established as a hindrance to African American leaders' access to top financiers of non-profit organizations (McDonough & Rodríguez, 2020). Insufficient networking opportunities are attributed to structural racism in which most foundations prefer working with White-led non-profit organizations to African American-led non-profits, contributing to limited networking opportunities for African American leaders (Mumford, 2022). Related findings can be observed in a qualitative study exploring structural racism and African American-led non-profits, indicating that most donors and decision-makers on grants work with predominantly white non-profits and may not have the

opportunity or information about African American-led non-profits (Gruby et al., 2021). Such a networking gap can be attributed to increased racism that has become systemic in American society in which African American people are neglected in most services including funding programs. Overall, African American leaders in non-profits have inadequate access to multifaceted donors as they have limited networks with multiple elite foundations to donate to their non-profits.

Mentorship and Professional Networks

The lack of African American mentors can be a challenge in securing mentorship for African Americans in predominantly white sectors. Predominantly white sectors such as non-profits may have a limited number of African Americans as leaders who could offer mentorship services to African Americans with inspiration to become future leaders (Apugo, 2021). In this regard, mentorship provides African Americans with the confidence to pursue leadership careers to become leaders in predominantly white sectors. Despite their aspirations to become leaders in predominantly white sectors, African American leaders lack role models who may mentor them to achieve their ambitions, making it difficult for them to attain leadership positions in organizations where Whites are the majority (Shen et al., 2022). Empirical evidence suggests that the lack of mentors is attributed to racial discrimination where African American people are given junior positions in the workplace while Whites predominantly occupy top leadership positions (Bejarano & Smooth, 2022). As a result, career growth opportunities are a preserve for the Whites, contributing to a lack of African American mentors who could mentor people of color for future leadership positions in predominantly White sectors. The availability of African American mentors can be an important factor for African Americans to achieve their leadership ambitions in the predominantly white sector.

The lack of professional networking is likely to be a challenge for African American leaders in the predominantly white sector. The experience of racism and stereotypes of African Americans has been a major challenge for most people who aspire to be leaders in predominantly white organizations such as non-profit institutions. Studies show that African American leaders in predominantly white sectors face untold

discrimination and segregation from top leadership positions due to their lack of adequate professional networks that could help them access available opportunities in leadership (Leath et al., 2022; Ramirez, 2022; Smith et al., 2021). These opportunities are often preserved for white employees despite African Americans having sufficient skills and requisite qualifications to hold leadership positions (Jang & Alexander, 2022). On one hand, research has shown that the underrepresentation of African Americans in leadership has been the reason for limited professional networks as there are no African Americans in top leadership positions in white predominant sectors who can help people of color to achieve their leadership ambitions (Johnson & Fournillier, 2021). Johnson and Fournillier (2021) explored challenges experienced by African American women in their efforts to be appointed to senior leadership positions in the US. The findings indicated that African American people encounter barriers such as a lack of networking relationships because of their skin color as no one is ready to mentor them for leadership positions. Limited networking has been a major hindrance for African American leaders who aspire to be leaders in predominantly white sectors including the non-profit sector.

Succession Planning in Non-Profit Organizations

Succession planning is an essential component of non-profit organizations' strategic management, underpinning both continuity and long-term success. Faced with distinctive challenges such as limited resources, dependency on volunteers, and the imperative to fulfill a specific mission, non-profit organizations require comprehensive succession plans. These plans not only address leadership transition but also safeguard the organization's overall sustainability (Helmig et al., 2014). Succession planning's core objective is to identify, develop, and groom potential leaders, ensuring the ongoing accomplishment of the organization's mission and service delivery.

A key feature of non-profit succession planning is the creation of a leadership pipeline. This involves fostering internal talent to fill crucial future roles (Rothwell, 2010). Given the resource and salary constraints that can make attracting and retaining top talent challenging for non-profits, internal talent development

becomes particularly important. Cultivating leaders from within promotes a smoother transition during leadership changes and fosters an organizational culture aligned with the organization's mission and values. Furthermore, a robust leadership pipeline can mitigate the adverse impact of leadership turnover on organizational performance and stakeholder trust (Tschirhart, 2014).

In addition to creating a leadership pipeline, non-profit organizations should prioritize contingency planning. This is vital for managing unexpected leadership changes, such as abrupt resignations or incapacitation (Adams, 2010). Non-profits should have emergency succession plans in place that outline the procedures to follow and the individuals who will take charge during unforeseen leadership transitions. These contingency measures help maintain organizational stability and functionality during abrupt leadership changes (Adams, 2010).

Non-profit research on executive turnover has generally focused on the scope of anticipated transitions (Ciampa & Watkins, 1999), with empirical studies largely limited to case studies or small sample sizes. BoardSource (2021) reports that only 29 percent of surveyed non-profits have a written succession plan. Transitions can occur due to sudden vacancies in staff or board positions, or the planned transition of a long-standing leader. Having a deliberate succession plan in place can enable a non-profit organization to navigate the inherent challenges of leadership transitions more effectively.

Diversity Equity and Inclusion in Succession Planning

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) play a pivotal role in succession planning as organizations strive to create a sustainable, competitive advantage in an increasingly diverse global market. Succession planning with a focus on DEI not only fosters an inclusive work environment, but also drives innovation and boosts productivity by harnessing the unique strengths and perspectives of a heterogeneous workforce (American Psychological Association, 2021). As the demographic landscape continues to evolve, a diverse talent pipeline ensures that organizations remain agile and responsive to the changing needs of their stakeholders, while also reflecting the rich tapestry of the communities they serve. In addition, incorporating

DEI in succession planning mitigates the risks of groupthink and monocultural biases, which can potentially hinder a company's ability to adapt and thrive in today's dynamic business environment.

Promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion in succession planning not only enhances the overall talent management process, but it also identifies and addresses potential barriers to career advancement for underrepresented groups (López, 2020). By doing so, organizations can actively combat systemic inequities and provide equal opportunities for all employees to reach their full potential. Emphasizing DEI in succession planning also serves to strengthen an organization's employer brand and reputation, thereby attracting and retaining top-tier talent from diverse backgrounds (American Psychological Association, 2021). This approach leads to a positive feedback loop, where an inclusive succession planning process generates a more diverse leadership team, which, in turn, fosters an environment that promotes diversity, equity, and inclusion at all levels of the organization.

African American Non-Profit Leaders' Leadership Styles and Strategies

Adaptive Leadership and Resilience

Leaders in non-profits use different leadership styles and strategies depending on the complexity of the problem they need to resolve. Extant research has demonstrated that African American non-profit leaders adopt adaptive leadership styles when navigating racial and professional barriers by fostering resilience (Alibašić, 2024). The results suggest that African American leaders work in unfriendly working conditions with systemic racism and racial stereotypes; thus, they need to adapt to these conditions by developing resilience. Despite the increased racial discrimination, they face at workplaces; African American leaders in non-profits have developed the resilience needed to cope with such circumstances by adopting leadership styles that align with the changing environment to offer effective solutions (Hamsinah, 2024). One such solution may include promoting inclusivity in the workplace to mitigate issues of racism and create a positive working environment (Singh et al., 2022). Such ability to adapt to different conditions creates resilience and strong emotional regulation among African American leaders to cope with negativities

associated with the denial of funds by donors. Additionally, African American leaders can make critical decisions based on prevailing circumstances within the working environment including promoting innovation and creativity to solve technical and complex problems (Chughtai et al., 2023). An example of an adaptive leader in this context is a transformational leader who encourages innovation and creativity through staff engagement. Adaptive African American non-profit leaders can change their leadership styles with the shift in the prevailing environment, creating resilience to negative experiences such as racism.

Community-Centered Leadership

African American leaders in non-profits engage in community-based leadership styles to empower and advocate for marginalized groups by building trust within the community. The leaders help African American communities address systemic issues such as racism, poverty and inequality by sourcing resources from donors to serve their communities through non-profit organizations (Taliep et al., 2022). African American leaders who build trust with the community can act as a link between donors and the community members to offer essential services they are deprived of due to systemic inequality and racism facing African American communities (Apostol-Dooley, 2021). Thus, through non-profit organizations, African American leaders can create positive relationships with communities who may sponsor various projects for those in dire need of essential services. Similar views were reported in previous research indicating that African American non-profit leaders are the link between the community and foundations sponsoring various projects to help the African American community (Afifi et al., 2020). Community-based leadership is thus an important leadership style used by African American non-profit leaders to engage the African American community to access sponsors and initiate various projects to empower those in need.

Summary

Current non-profit executives have significant hurdles in leading the day-to-day operations, while also planning for the future. With gaps in research and a lack of evidence-based strategies, research that supports non-profit succession planning must be implemented to recruit diverse leaders and sustain

organizational impact. This literature review highlights the foundation of leadership, the emergence of transformational leadership, the historical role of Black leadership, particularly in civil rights movements and community-based non-profits and social and political challenges faced by Black leaders. The literature review also provides a foundation for leadership designed to provide a better understanding of the role of leadership, competencies, capabilities, and traits to support the identification of non-profit leaders.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of African American non-profit executives. This study sought to provide an internal view of the advancement, influences, leadership characteristics, and resources for non-profit organizations to identify future non-profit executive officers to lead non-profit organizations. Illuminating the leadership journey from the perspectives of current and past African American non-profit executives helped uncover how individuals construct the meaning of their human experiences within the layers of influence and assist with identifying future non-profit executives (Moerer-Urdahl & Creswell, 2004). The significance of Executive Officers in non-profit organizations and the scarcity of succession planning and professional development for African Americans to serve in this leadership capacity, led me to identify a problem that was examined and analyzed throughout this study.

This chapter describes the qualitative method used in this research study to explore the lived experiences of African American non-profit executives. This chapter presents a detailed description of the phenomenological design that was used to guide the study. Building on chapters 1 and 2, chapter 3 examines the research methodology, study's timeframe, population and sample, and sampling strategy. It also offers descriptions of data collection and analytical processes, the steps used to increase the validity and reliability of the data and findings, and the tools used to gather and analyze the data.

Research Question

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of African American non-profit executives. The following overarching research question guided this qualitative study:

What lived experiences influenced the leadership advancement of African American non-profit executives?

Method

The research approach for this study was qualitative. Qualitative research methodology was used to conduct this research to understand participants' lived experiences who were able to describe the essence of their leadership phenomenon (Creswell & Creswell, 2018b; Roberts, 2010). Maxwell (2013) informed that the meaning cannot be obtained by assessing numerical data as in quantitative research. To gain a deeper understanding, qualitative research was utilized instead of quantitative research methodology to inform this study in answering the research question involved as it will lend a more in-depth analysis. The appropriateness of qualitative research methodology is acknowledged by Creswell and Poth (2018), who stated that the qualitative research process entails having an interest in the process leading to outcomes, while quantitative research has an interest in the outcomes and does not identify the experiences and circumstances leading to the outcomes. In an area of study with limited knowledge, qualitative study provided a better understanding of the leadership phenomenon.

The phenomenon in this study was the lived experiences of African American executives in non-profit organizations relevant to their advancement, influences, and leadership characteristics. The advancement, influences, and leadership characteristics of African American executives in non-profit organizations was of particular interest to aid in succession planning efforts and the recruitment of diverse leaders who will sustain organizational impact. This was the case as the number of African American non-profit executives were retiring and being succeeded by leaders whose tenures were brief in comparison to their predecessors.

Research Design Overview

This proposed dissertation in practice used a qualitative methodology with a phenomenological design to explore African American non-profit executives' advancement, influences, and leadership characteristics and experiences to answer questions about the prevailing leadership characteristics of African American non-profit executives. Creswell and Poth (2018) state that phenomenological studies are about the

lived experiences of several individuals. The goal of qualitative phenomenological research is to explore the lived experience of a phenomenon of the study, leadership advancement of African American non-profit executives (Giorgi et al., 2017).

Phenomenology

I chose phenomenology (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Locke et al., 2017) as the qualitative research design, as it allowed me to explore the lived experiences of participants, allowing for a deeper understanding of the meaning of an event, a role, process, a status, or context from a vantage point of someone (or group) who directly experienced that phenomenon. Using a phenomenological research design, the lived experiences of African American non-profit executives provided qualitative data that offered best practices for succession planning and professional development for African Americans seeking to serve in a non-profit executive capacity. I used phenomenology because it allowed me to ask open-ended questions, which contributed to the richness of data I collected. Through semi-structured interviews the reliability of questions asked of the leaders was ensured while also allowing the African American leadership experiences to be unaffected by my influence. This approach helped me identify the meaning of individuals' lived experiences related to a specific phenomenon and then develop a comprehensive, composite description of that phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Participants

In this research, I focused primarily on African American executives who were currently serving or had served within the last five years in any of the ninety affiliates of the National Urban League. The National Urban League served as an ideal organizational setting to explore the leadership experiences of African American executives in non-profit organizations due to its mission and structure. This 90-affiliate network, spanning diverse geographical locations across the country, encompasses a variety of programmatic strategic programmatic and organizational nuances, providing an in-depth framework for understanding leadership dynamics. By examining this specific population, I was able to understand the

lived experiences and unique challenges faced by African American executives a population chosen because they represent 94% of the executive leadership within this 90-affiliate network (National Urban League, n.d.). This focus highlighted the experiences of executives leading organizations committed to the public good and responsible for ensuring that programs are effective and resources are used to achieve their stated purpose.

I utilized purposeful sampling methodology for recruiting participants, a technique recognized for its efficacy in qualitative research for identifying information-rich cases when resources are limited (Patton, 2002). This method, further endorsed by Teddlie and Yu (2007), targeted specific populations or groups. The process primarily involved identifying and selecting individuals or groups who had substantial knowledge or experience with the phenomenon being studied (Creswell & Clark, 2011). The targeted positions within these non-profit or community-based organizations include the Chief Executive Officer (CEO), Chief Financial Officer (CFO), and the Chief Operations Officer or their equivalents.

I established specific criteria for prospective participants. Participant criteria required them to be currently serving or have served in a leadership position within the past five years at one of the National Urban League affiliates, and they should hold or have held a position of Chief Executive Officer, Chief Financial Officer, Chief Operations Officer, or their equivalents. To access and recruit from this population, I secured the necessary permissions. This process involved contacting the relevant administrative personnel, explaining the study's objectives and scope, and obtaining their consent.

For this phenomenological research, I interviewed thirteen individuals who met these criteria. This aligns with Creswell's (2007) recommendation for a diverse group size ranging from three to fifteen individuals for such studies. Moustakas (1994) also recommends a similar range, emphasizing that the goal of phenomenological research is depth of understanding, not generalization, which justifies the sample size for this study. Additionally, I collected basic demographic information about the participants, such as age, gender, position held, years of service, and the specific affiliate served.

Assuring the sufficiency of the sample size was critical for ensuring representative and robust data. In this qualitative study, my goal was to reach saturation, a state wherein no new or relevant information emerges from the data. I assessed the attainment of saturation based on the repetition of themes and data, demonstrating a comprehensive examination of the phenomenon under investigation. The goal of achieving saturation through a thorough examination of the phenomenon was met, as the sample size aligned with the recommended guidelines for qualitative studies by Creswell (2007) and Moustakas (1994).

Data Collection

In this qualitative research study, I used semi-structured, key-informant interviews to collect data from African American executive officers. The choice of this methodology allowed for a more in-depth exploration of the self-reported leadership characteristics, behaviors, and practices of the interviewees. I used an interview protocol that includes a section for demographic information and a series of questions crafted to elicit responses from African American non-profit executives. To ensure the collection of rich and meaningful data, the protocol also incorporated open-ended follow-up questions.

The protocol contained a specific set of questions, also included in Appendix C, to guide the interview process. As Frechette et al. (2020) noted, interviews are an effective means of gathering data about participants' lived experiences and their understanding of a phenomenon. Consistent with Creswell and Poth's (2018) recommendation, I conducted and recorded these interviews using Zoom Video Communication software, which was an effective tool for collecting in-depth interviews and data.

Data Collection Procedures

To collect data, each interviewee participated in a semi-structured interview consisting of twelve (12) leadership-related questions designed to collect their insight and explore their lived experiences. This semi structured format allowed for flexibility, encouraging participants to elaborate on their responses while ensuring that key components were consistently addressed and explored through the interview. Prior to the commencing of data collection, I followed the necessary ethical protocols to ensure the study's compliance

with institutional and organizational guidelines. This process involved obtaining permission to conduct the study through Creighton University's Institutional Review Board (IRB), to safeguard participant rights and uphold ethical research standards. In consideration of the sample population and organization, I also secured formal permission from the National Urban League, ensuring organizational support and access to participants. These steps helped to maintain ethical integrity and credibility of the research process.

Upon receiving the necessary approvals, I contacted potential interviewees via email, inviting them to participate in the study. If they agreed to participate, I arranged a one-hour interview session. This duration allowed time for obtaining consent, posing questions, hearing responses, and engaging in follow-up discussions. Before the scheduled interview, I emailed each participant the informed consent letter, the client bill of rights, and the interview protocol.

Interviews were conducted using Zoom Video Communication. At the beginning of each session, I requested each participant to verbally provide their informed consent to be interviewed, agree or disagree with the use of their names and organizations, and give permission for the interview to be recorded, adhering to the confidentiality guidelines that will be shared with each participant. To protect participant confidentiality, pseudonyms were assigned post-interview to each participant and their respective organizations. I also encrypted and stored the data securely, with access to identifiable information strictly limited.

In terms of participant selection, I used purposeful sampling to identify African American executive officers from affiliates of the National Urban League. According to Palinkas et al. (2013), purposeful sampling entails randomly selecting sampling units from a population segment with the most relevant information about the characteristics of interest. All participants were currently serving or had served in an executive position at a non-profit organization for more than five (5) years.

After participants had agreed to participate in the study and interview times had been scheduled, I provided them with the interview questions and the informed consent form a day or two prior to the

interview. This allowed the interviewees to be aware of the interview structure and content. I, as the only researcher conducting the interviews, reserved the right to ask direct follow-up questions to clarify responses. Consent procedures were followed at the onset of each interview to respect the rights of the participants.

Data Collection Tools

The primary instrument for data collection in this research was interviews conducted with African American non-profit executives. A structured interview protocol was utilized, which comprised a demographic information section and a sequence of questions tailored to solicit responses from the participants. To enhance the richness of the data collected, open-ended follow-up questions were incorporated into the protocol (see Appendix C for a full list of questions).

Interviews are a crucial tool in phenomenological studies as they allow researchers to delve into the lived experiences of the participants and their perceptions of the phenomenon under investigation. According to Knapik (2006), interviews provide an intimate understanding of participants' experiences and their rationale behind these experiences. In addition, phenomenological research is concerned with individual perspectives and subjectivities; therefore, interviews facilitate the capture of these individualistic and nuanced viewpoints, contributing to the richness and depth of the data collected (Tindall, 2009).

The choice of interviews as a data collection tool aligned with the principles of validity and reliability in qualitative research. In terms of validity, or trustworthiness, interviews enable researchers to gain an authentic, first-person account of the participants' experiences. This direct interaction helps eliminate potential misinterpretations or biases that might arise from second-hand information or observation (Creswell & Miller, 2000b). Concerning reliability, or dependability, interviews conducted with a well-structured protocol ensure consistency in the data collection process, as every participant is asked the same set of questions in a similar manner (Harrison & Murray, 2012).

Following Creswell and Creswell's (2018b) recommendation for effective data collection, interviews were conducted and recorded using Zoom Video Communication software. This platform offered a suitable environment for in-depth discussions, ensuring data is reliably captured and stored for subsequent analysis. Exit interviews were gathered from executives who had left the Urban League and their roles as executive officers, offering valuable insights into their experiences, challenges, and reasons for departure at the time of their departure. These tools provided a more comprehensive view of leadership turnover within the organization. To maintain transparency and replicability of this study, the full interview protocol is detailed in Appendix C, detailing the interview topic, types of questions, probing techniques, and questions used to guide the discussions. The multiple techniques and documentation supported the rigor of the data collection process and assist researchers in providing diverse example of information and documentation to replicate this research methodology.

Data Analysis

The data collected for this study was analyzed using a four-step process: transcription, synthesis, analysis, and interpretation. First, the Zoom audio-recorded interviews were transcribed using NVivo Qualitative Data Analysis Software (NVivo) and manually coded for variability and accuracy. Second, to ensure the accuracy of the information and grasp the general ideas, phrases, and overall meanings expressed by participants, the researcher thoroughly reviewed all interviews.

In the third step, NVivo was employed to code significant segments and theme tags and to establish a codebook, which guided the coding process and aid in interpreting codes in the data file (Babbie, 2016). This coding process helped identify overarching themes, linking the data, and revealing what is relevant to the research study and phenomenon. Hand coding and open coding methods further contextualized existing themes and identified any emerging themes not initially detected through NVivo. In the final step, the researcher scrutinized commonalities, differences, emergent themes, and relationships between themes across the data to understand how each experience contributed to executives' growth and success.

Final theme selection was validated through triangulation to enhance confidence in the data results (Creswell & Poth, 2018). As part of this process, additional data sources were sought, including organization annual reports, press releases, opinion editorials, and organization strategic plans. In line with the guidelines outlined in Appendix A, the integrity of the data was maintained by storing interview data on an external hard-drive, safeguarded in a secure location with a double-lock and key for five years post-research. Any physical information will be destroyed once it fulfills the study's purpose.

Methodological Integrity

To ensure the integrity and reliability of the study's methodology, several key measures were adopted. Firstly, bracketing was employed in accordance with Creswell and Poth (2018), a technique in which I as a researcher acknowledge and temporarily set aside my personal biases. This allowed for greater objectivity in data interpretation. Secondly, prior to initiating analysis, interview transcripts were returned to the participants for review and validation. This process is often referred to as member-checking. Each participant was prompted to review their respective transcript to verify its accuracy, make modifications where necessary, and exclude any information they did not want included in the analysis and findings.

The research question and context, alongside the definition of the phenomenon under exploration, were consistently utilized as guidelines throughout each stage of data collection and analysis. This ensures a constant focus on the research's purpose. Additionally, to preserve the true essence of the data, a thorough review of the complete interview transcripts was conducted. This meticulous examination ensured the retention of the original contextual meaning in the interviews, resulting in a study anchored securely in evidence relevant to the research objective and aim.

Research work inherently carries the potential for personal bias, particularly when researchers have personal attachments or opinions about the topic at hand (Machi & McEvoy, 2016). As an African American non-profit executive officer within a National Urban League Affiliate, I am acutely aware of the potential for personal bias. To mitigate this, I utilized a bracketing tool developed by Qualitative Mind (2020) to

proactively identify potential sources of bias. This tool allowed for a comprehensive evaluation of the research and study design. Further, to enhance the trustworthiness and validity of the study, I conducted member-checking with the interviewees. This process not only facilitated accuracy in data collection but also allowed for changes to be made as required.

Ethical Considerations

The primary ethical considerations in this study centered around maintaining the confidentiality of both the current and past Executive Directors included in the sample population, as well as preserving the privacy of the survey results. Before initiating data collection, I secured permission to conduct research from the Institutional Review Board (IRB), adhering to guidelines specified by Creswell and Creswell (2018b) and Roberts (2010). To ensure full compliance with IRB requirements, all necessary certifications were obtained, and permission for conducting social science research was sought via a formal application, in line with the university's IRB social-behavioral review committee protocols. Additionally, I procured the National Urban League's Vice President of Affiliate Services' approval to conduct the study.

To uphold participant anonymity, I employed Aluwihare-Samaranayake (2012) recommendation of using pseudonyms or initials in reports, and where possible, other identifying details were altered. To foster truthful and precise responses from current and past affiliate Chief Financial Officers, all data— including participants' names, aliases, scanned notes, and interview transcriptions— were securely stored and password-protected. To ensure the findings' credibility, multiple strategies as recommended by Creswell and Poth (2018) were utilized. Specifically, I adopted member-checking during data analysis and coding to verify the authenticity and trustworthiness of the participants' lived experiences. This process allowed research participants to review their interview transcripts for accuracy and confirm that their ideas, experiences, and beliefs shared during the interviews had been accurately captured (Roberts, 2010).

In terms of validity, or the "appropriateness" of the tools, processes, and data as defined by Leung (2015), I established internal validity through face validity. Face validity entailed obtaining assessments

from individuals who could be directly impacted by programs built on the research findings (Thomas et al., 1992). For this purpose, exit interviews and satisfaction surveys from executives who have left the Urban League and their position as an executive officer were collected. Furthermore, to ensure the reliability of the research process and data collected, I identified other African American non-profit executives who meet the study's selection criteria but did not participate in the interview process. This external check, as suggested by Creswell and Miller (2000b), will add an additional layer of credibility to the study.

Summary

This qualitative phenomenology research study was designed to explore the leadership characteristics of African American non-profit executives. The central research question explored the prevailing leadership characteristics of African American non-profit executives guided the study. For this purpose, exit interviews and satisfaction surveys from executives who have left the Urban League and their position as an executive officer were collected. Data was gathered through one-on-one in-person semi-structured interviews and hand-coded for themes after data has been electronically transcribed verbatim. The study's findings were further validated through member checking and data triangulation. I managed bias through online bracketing tools and be remained cautious of ethical considerations due to my role as an African American non- profit executive officer and proximity to professional peers within other National Urban League affiliates.

CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS AND FINDINGS

This qualitative phenomenological dissertation in practice study explored the lived experiences of African American executives in non-profit organizations relevant to their advancement, influences, and leadership characteristics. The lack of African Americans in executive positions in non-profit organizations merited further examination due to the scarcity of research studies addressing this topic. It was critical to address this phenomenon in order to inform leaders of resources to support African American non-profit executive leadership development and retention. The following research question guided this study: What are the lived experiences that influenced the leadership advancement of African American non-profit executives?

In this chapter, I present the findings that emerged from conducting the data collection and data analysis procedures described in Chapter 3. The following section of this chapter is a description of the data analysis procedure that was applied to the interview data. This chapter then includes a detailed presentation and summary of the findings.

Participants

Table 1 indicates the demographic characteristics of the study participants.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Participant	Age	Gender	Position Held	Years of Service	Years in Executive Leadership
P1	72	F	President & CEO	52	20
P2	33	F	President & CEO	12	3
P3	71	F	President & CEO	32	24
P4	37	F	President & CEO	2	2

P5	63	F	President & CEO	5	5
P6	57	F	President & CEO	20	17
P7	32	F	President & CEO	8	4
P8	62	F	President & CEO	3	3
P9	61	M	President & CEO	9	9
P10	49	F	President & CEO	5	5
P11	62	F	President & CEO	36	29
P12	51	M	President & CEO	35	3
P13	55	F	VP/CFO	15	15

Results

The audio-recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim using NVivo 14 computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software. The transcripts were then emailed to the participants to member check the accuracy and credibility of these findings. Participants were asked to review their individual transcript and the interpretations drawn from their interview (Creswell & Clark, 2011). This process helped confirm that the themes accurately reflected their experiences and perspectives, providing validation and adding depth to the findings (Braun & Clarke, 2006). All of the participants approved their transcripts.

The data was then analyzed and thematically coded in NVivo 14 software. The analysis began with reading and rereading the data in full to understand its scope and begin to identify patterns of meaning in the participants' responses. Handwritten notes were made regarding repeated words, phrases, and ideas in the data to serve as the basis for initial code identification in the following step.

The second step of the analysis, initial coding, began with breaking the participants' responses down into segments of text. Each text segment consisted of a phrase or group of phrases that expressed a single idea relevant to addressing the research question in this study. Overall, a total of 92 relevant text segments were identified, and they were assigned to 18 initial codes. Table 1 indicates the initial codes and the number of text segments assigned to each of them. Table 2 indicates how the related codes were grouped to form themes.

Table 1

Initial Codes

Initial code (in alphabetical order)	*n* of text segments assigned
Ability	2
Advancement through relationships	2
Character	3
Choosing an organization	3
Communication and connecting	3
Discrimination	3
Experience with youth organization	8
Family support	2
Gaining education and experience	12
Guidance by mentor	5
Ongoing self-improvement	5
Ongoing training	10
Overcoming obstacles	11
PD experienced but not prioritized	4

Service orientation	11
Serving as interim CEO	3
Witnessing disparities	3
Working directly with community	2

In the third step of the analysis, related initial codes were grouped into a smaller number of broader categories that represented the predominant patterns of meaning in the data and the major findings in this study. Table 2 indicates how the related codes were grouped to form themes.

Table 2

Grouping of Related Codes into Preliminary Themes

Preliminary theme Initial code grouped to form preliminary theme	*n* of text segments assigned
Preliminary theme 1: Codes related to early experiences	21
Experience with youth organization	
Guidance by mentor	
Serving as interim CEO	
Witnessing disparities	
Working directly with community	
Preliminary theme 2: Codes related to leadership characteristics	16
Ability	
Character	
Service orientation	
Preliminary theme 3: Codes related to facilitators of promotion	27
Advancement through relationships	

Preliminary theme Initial code grouped to form preliminary theme	*n* of text segments assigned
Choosing an organization	
Communication and connecting	
Family support	
Gaining education and experience	
Ongoing self-improvement	
Preliminary theme 4: Codes related to challenges encountered	14
Discrimination	
Overcoming obstacles	
Preliminary theme 5: Codes related to professional development	14
Ongoing training	
PD experienced but not prioritized	

The preliminary themes were checked against the data to ensure that they accurately reflected patterns of meaning in the participants' original responses. The preliminary themes were then named. Naming the themes involved reviewing the data assigned to them to assess its meaning as an answer addressing the research question. Each preliminary theme was then assigned a finalized name to indicate its relevance to the research question. Table 3 indicates how the preliminary themes were named.

Table 3

Finalized Naming of Preliminary Themes

Preliminary theme label		Finalized theme name
Early experiences	→	Theme 1: Most impactful early experiences
Leadership characteristics	→	Theme 2: Leadership characteristics brought to executive position
Facilitators of promotion	→	Theme 3: Facilitators of rise to executive position

Challenges encountered	→	Theme 4: Challenges encountered during rise to executive position
Professional development	→	Theme 5: Professional development undertaken

Findings

The research question used to guide this study was: What lived experiences influence the leadership advancement of African American non-profit executives? This presentation of the findings that emerged during data analysis is organized by theme. Five emergent themes were identified during data analysis to address the research question. The themes were: (Theme 1) most impactful early experiences, (Theme 2) leadership characteristics brought to executive position, (Theme 3) facilitators of rise to executive position, (Theme 4) challenges encountered during rise to executive position, and (Theme 5) professional development undertaken.

Theme 1: Most Impactful Early Experiences

Data associated with this theme indicated the participants' most impactful early career experiences during their rise to a non-profit executive position. Most participants described early experiences with a youth organization such as the Urban League as influencing their career trajectory in a positive manner. Guidance from mentors and service as an interim Chief Financial Officer in their non-profit organizations also emerged in the data as impactful experiences. A small number of the participants also cited witnessing economic, racial, or gender disparities and working directly with their communities as important parts of their careers.

Eight participants said that starting their career in a non-profit youth organization such as the Urban League influenced their rise to a non-profit executive position. P11, for example, described herself as "growing up" in the Urban League:

> I grew up in the Urban League. The Urban League was a major part of my youth, as well as moving into as a mature adult. It's been quite rewarding . . . I got my first job out of college through the Urban League.

While P11 reported that she "grew up" in the Urban League, taking her first job out of college with that organization, P12 described himself as being "found" by the Urban League, and as learning during his tenure there what it was like to take responsibility for other people:

> Urban League is where I got started. The Urban League found me when I was lost and put me on a path toward education . . . I know the responsibility of it, and people's lives are in my hands. and then the community that depends on a strong Urban League to move forward. So, it's been an incredible leadership journey.

P3, P6, P7, and P9 described their early experiences with the Urban League as formative. P7, for example, said, "Being in that internship program with the Urban League in high school . . . I understood that every piece of the puzzle [all staff members in an organization] was important in order to make the full picture." P2 referred to a different youth organization, the Early Young Professionals, as helping her to begin her career in non-profit work:

> Being a part of the Early Young Professionals, I think, was really a pivotal experience in my career path . . . through that, we learned a lot of things. We learned about resilience. We learned about budgeting, learned about event planning. We learned about galvanizing people and having our executive board. We were doing those things. So, I would say that was definitely a pivotal experience in my life that helped to get me here today, in terms of leadership.

From her time in the youth organization, P2 learned several skills that would help her to advance to a non-profit leadership position later in her career. P5 cited still another youth organization, her church's youth group, as contributing to the upward trajectory of her career:

> I would point to my experience in the church as having a real influence on my career choices, as well as having an influence on my leadership. Being president of the youth group, attending youth conferences, all of that had an influence.

Most participants were able to obtain early leadership and organizational experience through youth groups, including the Urban League. These experiences were formative, not only teaching them skills they would use to rise to leadership positions later in their careers but helping them to decide where they wanted to focus their careers.

Four participants indicated that receiving mentorship was an important early experience that promoted their rise to leadership. P10 referred to a mentor and sponsor who promoted her advancement to leadership:

> It was a Black woman seeing another Black woman [and] making an opportunity, an older Black woman having that wisdom and experience . . . She saw something in me, and she sent me to leadership trainings, and then I eventually grew into becoming a leader.

P10's advancement was facilitated by a same-race, same-gender mentor and sponsor. P3's leadership talents were cultivated by a mentor in the Urban League who chose her to be his successor:

> He asked me to meet him and talk, and then we had this conversation about him wanting to begin to work on succession planning, and after that conversation, he said, "Well, it's time for you to come back home [to the Urban League]. I'm going to groom you to be my successor."

P4 was not selected to be a specific leader's successor, but she was invited to participate in a leadership development program designed to groom future executives. In the program, an executive coach was assigned to work with P4. P4 described how she assimilated the lessons from her executive coach to plan her own career trajectory:

> I had a tendency to latch on to a mentor-slash-sponsor. I saw how they moved and shaped and negotiated and all of those things, and I have a tendency even to this day to really lean into that

> wisdom and lean into what they have shared. And so, when I think about the ascent to [my becoming] a leader, it's me really positioning myself to look at their [my mentor's] story, and how do I position myself to go that way? Sometimes, for some of those leaders that I knew, even emulating their trajectory in a sense, right? In that it's like, okay, they went to this step, or they did that next.

Mentorship was influential on these participants' careers because the sponsorship and support they received from a senior executive cultivated their skills and talents, provided them with modeling, and earmarked them for leadership positions.

Three participants described their service as interim Chief Financial Officer as leading to their eventual tenure as a full Chief Financial Officer. P7 explained that her staff asked her to serve as interim Chief Financial Officer when the position became vacant because she was the only employee who understood how all the distinct parts of the organization functioned:

> The previous Chief Financial Officer at our non-profit had resigned, and there was a vacancy. And at that moment, I realized that I was the only person that knew how all the programs worked in our office, not because it was my job, but because I had the desire to learn from other people what they were doing. And so, I knew a little bit about everything, and so that put me in a unique position to help during the transition. So, after being interim [CEO]—because my staff asked me to be interim—instead of having an outsider person come in after [my] being interim for a couple months, I realized, like, "Oh, maybe I could do this job." So, it wasn't until like two days before the deadline that I was like, "Maybe I should apply."

P7's rise to the Chief Financial Officer position included an element that was common to most participants' stories, in that she reported that she did not consider applying to be the leader of her organization until her staff asked her to, and until she had served in the position as interim for two months. P7's story was reminiscent of those of P3, P4, and P10, as discussed above in relation to mentorship, because those participants were not aiming for a Chief Financial Officer position in their organization until they were

unexpectedly selected as a successor or otherwise picked for executive grooming. P12's path to leadership began unexpectedly, when he voluntarily accepted a demotion to work in an organization that did work he found meaningful: "I took a probably $70,000 to $80,000 cut in salary to come work at an underfunded, Black-run non-profit, and I worked in the trenches." P12's voluntary demotion to the rank-and-file of this organization led unexpectedly to a leadership opportunity:

> I could have done that [worked "in the trenches"] the rest of my career. [But] then [the organization's leader] said that he is moving up, going to be the chief of staff to the mayor of [city name redacted], and he would like for me to take his place. I didn't feel ready for that, even though I had those other experiences. But I got to be interim for a little while and then realized that I didn't want anybody else to have that role. So, I applied for the permanent role. And, you know, that's how I got here.

As with the experiences of P7 and other participants, P12 did not plan to take a leadership role until the opportunity was offered to him. It may be noted, then, that approaching qualified candidates about leadership opportunities may be necessary, as those candidates might not consider applying for those positions on their own.

Three participants reported that witnessing disparities and injustice was formative in their careers. P1 discussed how she reconciled her aversion to tokenism with the need to use what she described as her "seat at the table" to advocate for causes that were vital to her community:

> Every board I sat on—everything—I would be the only female, the only Black. So, we have to sit at the table, because that's the only way we're going to let them know the needs of our constituents. And so, I did a lot of that. Did a lot of growing with that. Did a lot of learning with that. My feelings were hurt a lot because they [the other members of the boards] didn't look at what I was bringing. They looked at me as a female, and that bothered me. But I had to work through that, and I did.

P1 had to take advantage of the tokenism that got her seats on boards to advocate for her constituents. P8 reported that her commitment to social justice was shaped in part by witnessing disparities in hiring practices, both in the non-profit and for-profit sectors:

> The thing that impacted me the most was to see sometimes the disparity. And this is in the non-profit as well as for-profit. But I think I saw it more in the non-profit arena where, say, for instance, recruiting at colleges and universities for professionals, they would tend to go to majority white institutions a lot more quickly than they would to those that were considered as HBCUs. Salary offers sometimes were better, and, you know . . . equal pay was something that people didn't necessarily talk about.

Witnessing disparities could be motivating, as it was for P8, or disheartening, as it was for P1. However, P1 was able to use the forums to which she was only invited because she was Black or a woman as platforms for her community advocacy, and P8 was able to influence hiring practices when she rose to leadership.

Two participants reported that working directly with communities was a formative experience in their early careers. P1 said, “What inspired me is working in the community, working with people, connecting with them on their level. Sitting down and talking with them [and] going where they are made a difference [and] gave me a clearer understanding.” P1 found her interactions with community members motivating. P9 spoke of his experiences in hiring contractors for government work as formative:

> When I was in State Government on the supplier diversity side, we broke record numbers under my leadership. We were able to put about 164 million bucks into brown and Black pockets. And I found strategies that you know were very useful, and I found ways to build diverse labor forces on construction projects. So, those were experiences that I could bring.

P9’s formative experience involved promoting racial equity in government contracting at the state level, where he managed a large budget.

Theme 2: Leadership Characteristics Brought to Executive Position

The data associated with the Leadership Characteristics Brought to Executive Position theme indicated the leadership characteristics that the participants brought to their leadership positions. The most frequently mentioned characteristic was an orientation toward serving the community. Smaller numbers of participants indicated that they brought their good character and their skills or abilities to their leadership.

Eight participants cited their service orientation as a key characteristic in their work as non-profit leaders. When asked about her leadership role, P1 described her service orientation as follows:

> I truly care about making a difference in other people's lives, a positive difference. I mean, thinking about it brings tears to my eyes, because it means so much to me to see people get on their feet, help their family, help their children move in the right direction.

P1 discussed her service orientation in terms of an emotional commitment to assisting families in her community. P3 expressed herself in similar terms when she was asked what she brought to her leadership:

> I'm most proud of the influence that I've been able to have in our community, and the work that we do to help the children and the families that we serve. I'm really proud of the quality of service in our approach to serving our folks. We maintain dignity and respect in those relationships with the people we serve.

P3 described herself and her organization not only as oriented toward serving the community, but toward upholding the dignity of their constituents. P4 described her service orientation in terms of, “My unwavering, strong commitment to this mission in this movement. My executive coach literally said to my board, ‘You will not find another person who is as wholeheartedly sold out for this movement.’” P7 said that she earned a degree in psychology but did not want to practice because she wanted to serve her community by addressing systemic problems: “I wanted social change, like, how do you do stuff from an administrative side that can really create social change? Because I understood the problem wasn't necessarily people. It was structures or systems. And so that was my mindset.” P8 described herself as bringing a commitment to

ongoing learning and growth that she applied to altruistic service: “Never stop learning. The learnings that you are able to accomplish are gifts to your community, and you have to go back and share those gifts with your community, with no expectation of anything.” Most participants therefore described the primary asset or characteristic that they brought to their leadership roles as an orientation toward serving the community.

Three participants described their own character or personality as the primary asset they brought to their leadership. P2 described herself as bringing positivity:

> What people have said to me just about me as a person, people say to me, like, “You're a light,” right? “When you come into a room, you bring light into a situation.” Even my friends are like, “You're so positive,” right? And someone was like, “That's a gift.”

P2 perceived herself as bringing positivity and charisma to her leadership role, and as raising the morale of her subordinates and constituents. P9 described himself as bringing integrity to his leadership position:

> I bring honesty. I bring a bashful boldness where I speak truth to power in an unrestricted way. I know that as a leader, the community trusts me, and they got my back and know I got their back. I bring integrity.

P9 described himself as bringing an honesty that enabled the community to trust and work with him.

Two participants reported that what they brought to their leadership were abilities or skills. P5 described herself as a problem-solver whose solutions made sense to her constituents: “I think the linear way. It's beneficial because it allows me to problem-solve in a way that makes it easy for people to understand.” P7 knew how to change her presentation of herself to work in a variety of environments: “I know how to be a chameleon and change in the rooms. That's good. You have to do that, whether you’re Black or not.” Thus, P5 and P7 both described themselves as having skills that contributed to communication.

Theme 3: Facilitators of the Rise to an Executive Position

Data associated with this theme indicated the external facilitators of the participants' ascensions to non-profit leadership. The most frequently mentioned facilitators were education and experience. Smaller numbers of participants referred to relationships with colleagues and family as instrumental.

Nine of the participants reported that prior work experiences were important facilitators of their eventual rise to leadership. P5 described herself as having previous leadership experience that prepared her for her current position:

> In terms of my non-profit leadership, I led an organization . . . and that work was an advocacy and training organization on behalf of drug-treatment courts, and at the time that I started there, I was actually the second Chief Financial Officer in the history of the organization.

The leadership experience P5 gained in that comparatively new organization helped prepare her to lead the older, more established organization to which she later transitioned. P6 described a steady progression of experience with greater and greater responsibility as leading to her eventual leadership role:

> I worked for state government and was serving on a non-profit corporation's board of directors, and after a short stint serving in that capacity, I was asked to consider joining the operation side of the non-profit, coming on board as a staffer. I agreed to do so. I started as executive assistant to the president and was promoted from there to vice president, then successively promoted to executive vice president. and then when the Chief Financial Officer departed, I was asked by several members of the board of directors to consider pursuing the seat of president and Chief Financial Officer.

P6 reached her leadership position through a steady climb consisting of manageable stages of progression so that she was well-prepared for the Chief Financial Officer role when she was finally invited to assume it. The experience that facilitated P8's rise to non-profit leadership was her work in the for-profit sector, where she learned techniques for promoting efficiency:

> I thought it would be great to take what I learned in the for-profit arena, with all of the goal setting, KPIs [key performance indicators], taking all of that to a non-profit setting and seeing how maybe I could boost the productivity, the efficiency of the work.

P10 brought experience from public-sector work to the non-profit sector: "My advocacy comes from all the things I did, like criminal justice work. I know what it's like to see young men in a prison system. I know what it's like to work with them, the supports they need." P12 gained leadership experience in the military:

> I spent four years active duty, enlisted sergeant, and then I spent six years as an officer, a captain. And so, having those two leadership experiences as a noncommissioned officer and a commissioned officer, I got to see life from both perspectives, from military leadership.

Previous leadership experience was therefore an important facilitator for most participants' ascension to non-profit leadership positions, and so was experience with fields and skills relevant to their non-profit work, such as P10's work with prisoners and P8's experience with increasing efficiency.

Three participants indicated that relationships were important facilitators of their promotion to non-profit leadership. P2 attributed her advancement to her relationship with a mentor and sponsor:

> It was all through relationships. I know people say, "Oh, as you get older, some of the jobs you get are not the ones you apply for." And I can say that literally. How this happened, it was literally through relationships, and the relationship I had with my former Urban League President-CEO, and because I was already a young professional, so I had [the] opportunity to sit on the board.

P12 cited personal relationships, saying that she found the strength to lead by thinking of her family: "What mattered to me was my family. [Because of them I could] look at myself in the mirror and be okay with what I saw." P5 said that her rise to leadership was facilitated by her supportive spouse, who was willing to relocate to a different city so she could accept the job that led to her advancement: "He was willing. So that really did facilitate it [my advancement]." Supportive family and professional mentors were therefore important facilitators for some participants.

Theme 4: Challenges Encountered During the Rise to an Executive Position

Five participants reported that overcoming challenges and obstacles was an essential part of their rise to leadership. P1 reported that the greatest challenge she had to overcome was paying her way through college as a first-generation student:

> My mom was a CNA [certified nursing assistant], and she only got a job after she was divorced. And my father worked in a factory forever. So, education wasn't anything that was on their radar. So I had to learn that education was going to make a difference in my life. And getting that done, going to school, I did while I was working, and then paying for it, doing all of that, and coming up with the cost.

P1 reported that gaining an education required her both to realize on her own the importance of doing so, and then to earn the money to pay for it while being a student. P7 also described herself as overcoming an inauspicious background to become the first college graduate in her family, saying that she began her life as,

> A girl from the hood, parents had addictions, like, there's so many things that I had to navigate through, which really made me a good leader, because I've been leading since I was three. So, it was just what I did. If that meant I was the first person to go to college in my family.

P7 indicated that overcoming challenges all her life prepared her to overcome challenges as a non-profit leader. P4 indicated that she had struggled with mental illness:

> I have gone through bouts of depression. And so, some of that comes along with this idea of being perfect and being extremely an overachiever, right? And so, when I'm not in a space where I'm overachieving, or I'm at the time where my mind is literally wandering, I do go down that slope [into depression]. And so, I've intentionally made sure that I'm working on that.

P4 added that she was working on her depression through therapy. P5 said of the primary challenge she experienced,

> It [my challenge] has absolutely been work-life balance. And it is just how I am built . . . you can't turn anything around and be half-present. So, I've always been totally present in a professional way, and sometimes that means that my family gets the short end. So up until probably five or six years ago, I hadn't taken a vacation that was not either an extension of work or a precedent to work.

P5 did not report any negative effects from overworking herself, except that she was not as present for her family as she would have liked to be. P9 reported that he had to overcome adolescent addiction to begin his career path:

> Throughout my life, growing up poor, growing up in New York . . . Everybody in my neighborhood, the Black boys my age wanted to be stickup kids. And then to be able to get through that, being drug-addicted as a teenager from age 10 to 22, smoking weed every day or using different drugs, I was no different than no other kids. I had those challenges to get over that and still be able to achieve throughout my career.

P12 reported that his greatest challenge was overcoming discrimination, which he witnessed in the contrast between the availability of funding for the predominantly Black organization for which he worked at time of study, versus the availability of funding for the predominantly white organization where he previously worked:

> I enjoy being a Black man. I do. But there are some days in this non-profit work, I wonder what I could do if I had blond hair and blue eyes. When I'm dealing with funders, the level of explanation that I've got to navigate in order to get what I need, and having known what it was like to work for white organizations, [where] I could have whatever, I wanted. But not when you're a Black organization.

The participants therefore reported that they needed to overcome a variety of challenges to achieve their rise to non-profit leadership, including disadvantaged backgrounds, mental illness, finding enough time for their families, and discrimination.

Theme 5: Professional Development Undertaken

Eight participants reported that they prioritized ongoing professional development (PD) for themselves. P1 said of PD, “I felt that was important. So, I had to make a point of doing that. So, I make sure I'm always updating myself through webinars or programs that are out there.” P10 said that she prioritized going to PD conferences because they helped her learn new skills: “I want to go to everything, because those conferences are where you learn what's happening, what's new, what's happening in other areas that you can bring back to your area.” P12 also allotted time for ongoing skill development, which was facilitated by his organization: “I usually pick one or two [PDs] a year. The Urban League has a nice little set of systems in place that keep you thinking about it.” P3 also said that her organization was good at promoting PD, but she added that she believed and told her staff, “You have to take personal responsibility for it [PD].” P3 said of how she took responsibility for her own PD,

> What I would do is seek it out, and most of the stuff that I sought out for myself to participate in would be stuff on leadership development. [For example,] I had an opportunity to study systems thinking at MIT, which is important into figuring out how to lead and change systems.

P4 said of PD, “It’s very high on my list. So, I will tell you, at least three times a week, I'm reading some type of professional development article, looking at a Ted Talk, or something.” P5 reported that she served on four non-profit boards, “And with each of those, there is professional development.” P7 said that was required to undergo PD, but that she made it her goal to attend more conferences than she was required to:

> So, there's some grants that I'm over that I'm required to have continued education. So, it forces me to go to conferences, because that's the majority [of PD]. Last year, in 2023, I have vowed that I was going to go to every event possible that the National Urban League had. Thus, most participants reported that they prioritized PD and pursued it on their own initiative.

Discussion

This study presented findings that highlighted the lived experiences of African American executives in non-profit organizations, focusing on the influences on their leadership advancement. The literature has previously emphasized the barriers faced by minority leaders, but less is known about the specific lived experiences that facilitate their rise to executive positions. The following discussion interprets the study's findings, aligns them with previous literature, and identifies the strengths and limitations of this study.

Alignment to Current Literature

The findings of this study align with existing literature on the importance of mentorship and early career experiences for African American leaders. Previous studies, such as those by Chao (2009) and Ensher and Murphy (2011), have highlighted the critical role of mentors in providing guidance and career advancement opportunities. This study's participants echoed these sentiments, emphasizing how mentorship and support from senior leaders significantly impacted their career trajectories. Additionally, the literature supports the theme of overcoming barriers, such as discrimination and socioeconomic challenges (Jackson & Wingfield, 2013). These findings are consistent with the notion that African American leaders often face additional hurdles yet exhibit remarkable resilience and determination.

The theme of professional development is consistent with existing research. The emphasis on continuous learning and skill enhancement aligns with the findings of studies like Hart Research Associates (2016), which reported that ongoing professional development is crucial for career advancement. This study expands on this by demonstrating that African American executives prioritize professional development to enhance their skills and navigate and overcome systemic barriers in their career paths. This aligns with the literature on transformational leadership, which emphasizes the importance of continuous development and the ability to inspire and motivate others (Bass, 1985).

The study also highlights the role of lived experiences in shaping leadership, which aligns with Landry's (2011) assertion that personal knowledge and first-hand involvement are critical for understanding

leadership practices. Participants in this study described how their early experiences, mentorship, and direct community involvement were pivotal in their development as leaders. This reinforces the importance of lived experiences in leadership, as Hallenbeck (2017) and Chalker et al. (2014) discussed.

The themes identified in this study further substantiate these findings and align current literature. Participants' early experiences often provided foundational skills and perspectives that shaped their leadership styles, supported by research indicating that formative experiences significantly influence leadership development (Chalker et al., 2014; Hallenbeck, 2017). The leadership characteristics that participants brough to their roles are consistent with transformational leadership theory, which highlights attributes such as vision, inspiration, and the ability to motivate others (Bass, 1985; Landry, 2011). Key facilitators identified included mentorship, professional development opportunities and networking, all critical for career advancement as discussed by Chao (2009) and Ensher and Murphy (2011).

Participants faced barriers significant barriers, including discrimination and socioeconomic challenges, echoing the findings of Jackson and Wingfield (2013) about the unique obstacles encountered by African American leaders. The emphasis on continuous learning and development is consistent with Hart Research Associates (2016), demonstrating the critical role of ongoing professional development in leadership success. Additionally, the concepts of influence and power, as well as the motivation driving these leaders, were prominent themes that align with transformational leadership and motivational theories (Bass, 1985). The participants' interviews underscored how their lived experiences, including overcoming adversity and leveraging personal strengths, played a pivotal role in their leadership journeys (Hallenbeck, 2017).

Strengths

This study possesses several strengths that validate its findings. First, the use of a rigorous qualitative methodology, including a detailed thematic analysis process as described by Braun and Clarke (2006), ensured a thorough examination of the data. Member checking added to the credibility of the findings,

allowing participants to confirm the accuracy of the interpretations. Additionally, the diversity of the participants, who represented various roles and experiences within non-profit organizations, provided a rich and comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing their leadership advancement. The study's findings significantly enhance the existing body of literature by providing evidence-based insights that underscore African American nonprofit executives' resilience and strategic approaches. These findings align with and expand upon current literature, offering nuanced perspectives illuminating the unique experiences and challenges faced by African American leaders in the nonprofit sector. This depth of analysis highlights the study's strength, highlighting its contribution to a more comprehensive understanding of African American non-profit.

Limitations

Despite its strengths, this study has limitations, which were previously acknowledged in Chapter One. While the sample size is sufficient for qualitative research and saturation was reached, it is relatively small and may not capture the full range of experiences of African American leaders in non-profit organizations. Additionally, the study's focus on a single non-profit organization was a deliberate choice to maintain a clear and focused research scope, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other sectors or types of non-profit organizations. To address this, future research could benefit from including a larger and more diverse sample and exploring similar themes in different organizational contexts.

Another limitation is the potential for researcher bias, inherent in qualitative studies. Despite efforts to mitigate this through methodological rigor and triangulation with existing literature, my role as both a peer and interviewer could have influenced the participants' responses To reduce bias, I employed a bracketing tool recommended by Qualitative Mind (2020) to identify potential sources of bias and conducted member-checking with interviewees to verify the accuracy of the collected information.

The study's findings significantly enhance the existing body of literature by providing evidence-based insights that underscore African American nonprofit executives' resilience and strategic approaches. These

findings align with and expand upon current literature, offering nuanced perspectives illuminating the unique experiences and challenges African American leaders face in the nonprofit sector. This depth of analysis highlights the study's strength, highlighting its contribution to a more comprehensive understanding of African American nonprofit executives.

Summary

The research question used to guide this study was: What lived experiences influence the leadership advancement of African American non-profit executives? To address this question, I conducted in-depth interviews with 13 African American non-profit executives, transcribed the interviews verbatim, and analyzed the data using NVivo 14 software. This rigorous data analysis process involved reading and rereading the transcripts, making notes, identifying initial codes, and grouping these codes into broader themes. Five emergent themes were identified during the analysis. Five emergent themes were identified during data analysis to address this question.

The first theme, "most impactful early experiences," highlighted the transformative power of early career experiences in shaping the participants' leadership trajectories. Many described formative interactions with youth organizations like the Urban League, mentorship, and service as interim Chief Financial Officer. These experiences provided foundational skills and motivation and set them on a path toward leadership roles in non-profit organizations, inspiring others to recognize and harness the potential of such experiences.

The second theme, "leadership characteristics brought to executive position," found that participants brought specific leadership characteristics to their executive roles, with a particular emphasis on a service orientation. Participants also highlighted their personal attributes, such as integrity, problem-solving abilities, and adaptability, which were not just instrumental but crucial in their effectiveness as leaders, underscoring the importance of these qualities in effective leadership.

The third theme, "facilitators of rise to an executive position," identified key facilitators, including prior work experience, mentorship, supportive relationships, and educational background. These elements

collectively contributed to the participants' readiness and capability to assume executive roles. The study underscores the importance of diverse experiences and robust support systems in advancing to leadership positions.

The fourth theme, "challenges encountered during rise to executive position," revealed significant challenges faced by participants on their path to leadership, including discrimination, socioeconomic barriers, balancing work, and personal life, and overcoming personal adversity. These challenges often required resilience and determination, reinforcing the need for supportive networks and resources to help navigate these obstacles.

The fifth theme, "professional development undertaken," highlighted the crucial role of ongoing professional development. Participants actively sought opportunities to enhance their skills and knowledge. This commitment to continuous learning was essential for navigating and overcoming systemic barriers, aligning transformational leadership principles emphasizing growth and development. Chapter 5 includes discussion, interpretation, and recommendations based on these findings, providing a comprehensive understanding of factors influencing the leadership advancement of African American nonprofit executives.

CHAPTER FIVE: PROPOSED SOLUTION AND IMPLICATIONS

This dissertation in practice focused on the experiences of African American executives in non-profit organizations, particularly regarding their advancement, influences, and leadership characteristics. This study provided leaders with insights into the leadership characteristics necessary to retain and recruit African American non-profit executives. These findings are essential as they address the lack of evidence-based tools available to inform leaders about resources that support African American non-profit executive leadership development and retention.

The study offers guidance to African Americans aspiring to serve in executive capacities within non-profit organizations and informs leaders of the challenges faced by African American non-profit executives. The results of this study contribute to existing empirical research on African American non-profit executives in organizations and provide recommendations for improving the recruitment and retention of these leaders. In Chapter 5 of this dissertation, I discussed the study's findings by suggesting a proposed solution, describing procedures for implementation, and discussing practical, research-related, and leadership-related implications.

Aim Statement

This phenomenological qualitative study aimed to explore and present the lived experiences of African American executives in non-profit organizations, focusing on their advancement, influences, and leadership characteristics. The research provided guidance for African Americans aspiring to serve in executive capacities within non-profit organizations. Non-profit organizations led by and serving African Americans are vital for delivering diverse human services and advocacy despite facing more conflict and struggles with equity and diversity than their white counterparts (Thomas-Breitfeld et al., n.d.). The data collected provided an understanding of the experiences of African American non-profit executives, including the challenges, strengths, and needs of non-profit organizations. The study also assisted in identifying future non-profit executives (Moerer-Urdahl & Creswell, 2004) by providing an internal view of

their experiences, leadership advancement, and the resources necessary for non-profit organizations to identify future executive officers.

The findings revealed impactful early experiences such as guidance from mentors, service as interim Chief Financial Officer, witnessing economic, racial, or gender disparities, and working directly with their communities as essential parts of their careers. The results also highlighted leadership characteristics brought to executive positions, including an orientation toward serving the community and raising the morale of subordinates and constituents. Additionally, the study identified key facilitators of the rise to executive positions, such as education, experience, and supportive relationships with colleagues and family. However, challenges encountered by African Americans in non-profit organizations included disadvantaged backgrounds, mental illness, balancing family time, and discrimination. The findings underscored the need for ongoing professional development (PD).

Proposed Solution

Given the unique challenges faced by African American executives in non-profit organizations, it is crucial to implement targeted strategies to support their advancement, influences, and leadership characteristics. I propose two solutions: (1) the creation of a structured mentorship program that includes opportunities for African American executives to serve as interim Chief Financial Officers, and (2) the establishment of leadership development initiatives focused on addressing economic, racial and gender disparities. These strategies require a collaborative approach to effectively address the specific needs of African American leaders. The findings of this qualitative phenomenological study highlight the importance of mentorship, including opportunities to serve as interim Chief Financial Officers, and the development of strategies to address economic, racial, or gender disparities. Additionally, African American executives should engage directly with their communities and maintain a strong orientation toward community service.

Education and experience are necessary components, as is fostering support from relationships with colleagues, board members, and family. Promoting ongoing professional development (PD) is also essential

to enhancing leadership skills. Implementing these solutions requires collaboration across the non-profit sector and the alignment of various research cultures, practices, and policies. Such an integrated approach will effectively address the obstacles faced by African American executives in non-profit organizations, ensuring their continues growth and success in leadership roles. Applying the findings of this study, I propose developing a Professional Development Program for Chief Financial Officers: Advancing African American Leadership in Non-Profit Organizations. This program would be designed with specific learning objectives aimed at addressing the unique challenges faced by African American executives in non-profit organizations. The program's core components include mentorship and interim CEO opportunities, addressing economic, racial, and gender disparities, fostering community engagement, providing education and practical experience, and ensuring ongoing professional development (PD). These objectives are tailored to support the advancement of African American leaders by equipping them with the necessary skills, knowledge, and networks to overcome barriers to leadership. By offering personalized mentorship, participants will gain strategic advice and hands-on leadership experience, enhancing their readiness for executive roles. Addressing disparities through workshops and policy revisions ensures a more equitable and inclusive organizational environment. Engaging directly with communities strengthens leadership ties and deepens understanding of community dynamics, while targeted education and practical experiences prepare executives for effective decision-making and public engagement. Continuous professional development through workshops, networking, and access to resources ensures that participants sustain their leadership growth, build strong peer networks, and confidently lead their organizations. These learning objectives collectively aim to empower African American executives to navigate and excel in the complex landscape of non-profit leadership.

Given the study’s focus on the National Urban League and its affiliates, I would propose delivering a presentation or workshop at the National Urban League’s Whitney M. Young Leadership Conference. This annual leadership immersion event is a key opportunity to engage with Urban League affiliate staff,

leadership and board members, expanding their expertise, building community and sharing insights to strengthen the Urban League movement. The presentation would introduce the proposed Professional Development Program for Chief Financial Officers, designed to support the advancement, influence, and leadership development of executives in non-profit organizations. The program addresses the unique challenges faced by African American leaders by offering mentorship, fostering community engagement, and promoting continuous learning and professional growth. The program will be structured around five core components: mentorship and interim Chief Financial Officer opportunities, addressing disparities, community engagement, education and experience, and ongoing professional development (PD).

Evidence that Supports the Solution

Non-profit organizations that serve and are led by African Americans are vital for delivering diverse human services and advocacy, even when they face more conflict and struggles with equity and diversity than their white counterparts (Thomas-Breitfeld et al., n.d.). Filling leadership vacancies has remained a significant organizational challenge for non-profit organizations in the United States (Landles-Cobb et al., 2015). Additionally, the non-profit sector is experiencing a racial leadership gap. The lack of evidence-based tools to inform leaders of resources to support African American non-profit executive leadership development and retention necessitates the proposed solutions.

Evidence from this study supports the implementation of mentorship programs as a strategy for advancing African American executives in non-profit organizations. The data revealed that mentorship, including opportunities to serve as interim Chief Financial Officers, plays a significant role in preparing African American staff for leadership positions. Participants highlighted that the guidance, sponsorship, and support they received from senior executives were instrumental in cultivating their leadership skills, providing them with role models, and positioning them for advancement within their organizations. This finding aligns with the literature, which emphasizes the importance of mentorship in leadership development. Landry (2011) underscores the personal knowledge and first-hand involvement through

mentorship are essential for understanding and navigating leadership practices, particularly for African American non-profit executives.

The study's findings indicate that addressing economic, racial, and gender disparities in leadership is important for fostering a more inclusive and diverse leadership workforce. Participants reported that witnessing economic and racial disparities and injustice was influential in their careers. This finding is supported by Jackson and Wingfield (2013) who emphasize the barriers posed by discrimination and socioeconomic challenges. The non-profit sector's racial leadership gap contributes to the limited number of African American executives documented by Thomas-Breitfeld et al. (n.d.), further highlights the need for intentional strategies to promote diversity in leadership roles. The data collected in this study suggests that promoting diversity in recruitment and retention is not just beneficial but necessary for addressing these disparities and ensuring African American executive shave equitable opportunities to ascend to leadership positions.

The rationale for the proposed solution, which includes creating mentorship programs and addressing disparities in leadership, is firmly grounded in the findings of this study. The data demonstrate that mentorship is a critical early experience that can propel African American executives into leadership roles. Additionally, the persistent challenges of economic, racial, and gender disparities necessitate proactive strategies to ensure equality in hiring and support within non-profit organizations. By implementing these solutions, non-profit organizations can effectively address the leadership gap, promote inclusivity, and support the professional development of African American executives. These findings provide a strong basis for advocating for mentorship and diversity initiatives as essential components of leadership development in the non-profit sector.

Education and experience are also important for professional growth and receiving support from colleagues and family can help promote African American executives to leadership positions in non-profit organizations. Most people receiving social innovation education and accessing leadership opportunities

within the wider sector are working to solve problems they have not experienced (Landry, 2011). Nearly every African American executive acknowledged the importance of education. Continued education is essential for African American executives to achieve their leadership ambitions. Attracting and retaining top talent is challenging for non-profits, making internal talent development particularly important. Cultivating leaders from within promotes a smoother transition during leadership changes and fosters an organizational culture aligned with the organization's mission and values. Furthermore, a robust leadership pipeline through education and experience can mitigate the adverse impact of leadership turnover in non-profit organizations (Tschirhart, 2014).

Ongoing professional development (PD) is another critical factor in enhancing leadership skills and addressing the challenges faced by African Americans in non-profit leadership roles. The theme of professional development is consistent with existing research. The emphasis on continuous learning and skill enhancement aligns with the findings of studies like Hart Research Associates (2016), which report that ongoing professional development is crucial for career advancement. This study builds on this by demonstrating that African American executives prioritize professional development to enhance their skills and navigate and overcome systemic barriers in their career paths. These findings align with transformational leadership literature, particularly the work of (Bass, 1985) which highlights the significance of continuous development and the ability to inspire and motivate others.

Maintaining and recruiting African Americans in executive roles in non-profit organizations promote sustaining positions through providing professional development that allows African Americans to be successful in these roles. There is a need to create space for practitioners, scholars, policymakers, and experts to collaborate for a shared vision of a strong strategy for promoting African American staff to executive positions in succession planning. Succession planning also strengthens an organization's employer brand and reputation, attracting and retaining top-tier talent from diverse backgrounds (American Psychological Association, 2021).

Evidence that Challenges the Solution

Inventive strategies for addressing complex leadership issues require knowledge sharing, orientation, and cooperation across different systems and policy and practice domains. Diverse cultures may require different techniques to effectively promote the mentorship of African American executives, making it challenging to integrate these efforts into succession planning within non-profit organizations. A key feature of non-profit succession planning is the creation of a leadership pipeline through education and on-the-job experience for African Americans (Rothwell, 2010). This process involves fostering internal talent to fill crucial future roles by offering professional development programs (Rothwell, 2010). However, racial discrimination has posed significant challenges to ensuring equity in recruitment programs for African American executives in non-profit organizations in the United States.

Given the resource and salary constraints that can make attracting and retaining top talent challenging for non-profits, internal talent development becomes particularly important. However, some non-profit organizations may need more resources to retain top African American executive talent, leading to a high turnover rate (Tschirhart, 2014). This dissonance in solutions calls for collaboration among diverse stakeholders in the non-profit sector to address the difficulty in filling leadership vacancies.

Cultivating leaders from within promotes a smoother transition during leadership changes and fosters an organizational culture aligned with the organization's mission and values. As a result, a robust leadership pipeline can mitigate the adverse impact of leadership turnover on organizational performance (Tschirhart, 2014). However, creating working conditions where diverse individuals can intermingle, share innovative ideas, make informed decisions, and address shared concerns remains a significant challenge in executing the proposed solutions. The success of these solutions depends on the ability of African American executives to adapt to different cultural divides, respect cultural differences, and uphold a commitment to a shared vision and goals (López, 2020).

Implementation of the Proposed Solutions

To effectively implement the proposed solutions, non-profit organizations should focus on developing and adopting comprehensive support programs that include mentorship initiatives, community engagement, and continuous professional development. This is also a crucial component of implementing the Professional Development Program for Chief Financial Officers: Advancing African American Leadership in Non-Profit Organizations. One of the most critical steps in this process is enhancing the Human Resources (HR) Department by integrating career growth and development responsibilities. This enhancement could take the form of establishing a separate office within the HR Department or assigning these responsibilities to a dedicated HR staff member who specializes in leadership development and diversity initiatives. By incorporating these elements into the HR structure, organizations can better support the advancement of African American executives, ensuring that leadership development is aligned with the organization's commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion, and is effectively integrated into the overall strategy for leadership growth and community impact.

The primary goal of this role would be to build a diverse workforce and promote diversity in recruiting and advancing executives within the organization. This newly created office or designated HR role would play a pivotal role in guiding African American executives by pairing them with experienced career mentors and offering them opportunities to serve as interim Chief Executive Officer. These mentorship opportunities are essential for providing strategic advice on career advancement, expanding professional networks, and boosting confidence in assuming executive roles, particularly when interacting with Boards of Directors, a critical component of non-profit organizations.

These mentorship programs would specifically focus on preparing executives for interaction with Boards of Directors, which is a critical component of non-profit organizations. By offering these tailored experiences, the HR department can ensure that African American executives are well prepared to navigate

the unique challenges of leadership roles, including board governance, strategic decision-making, and community engagement.

To ensure the success of the professional development program for Chief Executive Officers, it is imperative that this HR enhancement is supported by a well-defined framework that includes clear goals, measurable outcomes, and ongoing evaluation. This framework would involve regular assessments of the program's effectiveness, feedback from participants, and continuous refinement of the mentorship and development strategies based on emerging trends and best practices in leadership development.

Another critical component of the implementation strategy is addressing economic, racial, and gender disparities within non-profit organizations. Workshops on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) should be conducted to explore the impact of these disparities and offer actionable strategies for creating equitable environments. Policy reviews and implementations should also be guided to promote DEI in recruitment, retention, and leadership development. These efforts will result in improved organizational policies, a more inclusive work environment, and a more substantial commitment to equity within the organization, aligning with the findings of López (2020).

Community engagement is also a vital aspect of the proposed solutions, and it plays a crucial role in implementing the professional development program for Chief Executive Officers: Advancing African American Leadership in Non-Profit Organizations. African American executives must work directly with their communities to foster a deeper understanding of community needs and challenges. By organizing community immersion experiences and facilitating leadership in service projects, non-profit organizations can reinforce the importance of community-oriented leadership. This approach will strengthen community ties, enhance understanding of community dynamics, and help develop service-oriented leaders committed to their communities. Integrating these community engagement initiatives into the professional development program ensures that the Chief Executive Officers not only gain leadership skills but also remain deeply connected to the communities they serve which is essential for maintaining and sustainable change.

Educational opportunities and practical experiences are critical for supporting the leadership ambitions of African American executives. Leadership development courses focused on strategic planning, financial management, and organizational leadership should be offered, along with cross-sector internships and job shadowing opportunities. These educational initiatives will enhance leadership competencies, broaden sector knowledge, and prepare executives for effective communication with boards, funders, and community members. The importance of lived experiences in leadership, as highlighted by Hallenbeck (2017) and Chalker et al. (2014), underscores the need for guiding and counseling centers in non-profit organizations to offer education and mentorship services, advising minorities on the requirements to attain leadership positions.

Finally, continuous professional development (PD) is essential for sustaining leadership growth among African American executives in non-profit organizations. Regularly scheduled PD workshops and seminars covering transformational leadership, change management, and innovation should be implemented. Networking and peer learning platforms should be created to enable participants to share the best practices and build a supportive professional community. Access to online resources, publications, and case studies relevant to the challenges and opportunities in non-profit leadership should also be provided. These initiatives will ensure sustained professional growth, a strong peer support network, and the ability to inspire and lead confidently. By adopting these strategies, non-profit organizations can address the challenges faced by African American executives and enhance leadership diversity within the sector, ultimately helping to fill leadership vacancies and promote equity and inclusion in leadership roles.

Timeline for Implementation of the Solution

The implementation of the proposed solutions will follow a phased approach, beginning with the establishment of foundational elements and progressing toward full integration and continuous improvement over a four-year period. During the first phase, spanning the first year of implementation, non-profit organizations will focus on assessing current human resources (HR) structures and planning for the

integration of career growth and development responsibilities. This phase will involve forming dedicated teams to oversee the mentorship initiatives, diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) workshops, and establishing community engagement programs. Leadership teams will also conduct regular meetings to finalize the development of leadership courses and cross-sector internship opportunities, with the goal of laying the groundwork for the effective execution of the proposed solutions.

In the second phase, second year of implementation, non-profit organizations will launch professional programs, including mentorship initiatives, interim Chief Executive Officers placements, and community immersion experiences. Diversity, Equity and Inclusion workshops and policy reviews will also commence, focusing on the identification and mitigation of disparities within the organizations. Leadership development courses and internships will be introduced, allowing the initial group of African American executives to engage in these opportunities. Feedback from these pilot programs will be collected and used to refine the processes and strategies for broader implementation.

The third phase, covering the third year of implementation, will mark the full implementation of the proposed solutions across all participating non-profit organizations. The career growth and development office or designated HR roles will be fully operational, with mentorship programs, Diversity, Equity and Inclusion initiatives, and community engagement projects running at scale. Leadership development courses, cross-sector internships, and continuous professional development (PD) workshops will be regularly scheduled and available to all African American executives. Networking and peer learning platforms will also be fully established, fostering a supportive professional community.

The fourth phase, fourth year of implementation, will focus on monitoring and evaluating the impact of the implemented solutions. This will include measuring leadership growth, organizational performance, and the effectiveness of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion initiatives. Regular feedback will be gathered through surveys, interviews, and focus groups to identify areas for improvement. The findings from this evaluation will inform the continuous refinement of the programs, ensuring their sustainability and

scalability for future use. By following this timeline, non-profit organizations will be able to systematically implement the proposed solutions, addressing the unique challenges faced by African American executives and promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion in leadership roles.

Evaluating the Outcome of Implementing the Solution

Data analysis will be utilized to assess the outcome of executing each suggested solution in this dissertation. The adoption of comprehensive support programs, including mentorship programs will demonstrate an improvement in filling leadership vacancies in non-profit organizations. This will increase the number of African American executives in non-profit organizations in the United States. Non-profit organizations will become committed to preventing discrimination of African American executives during the promotion by offering mentorship programs on cultural diversity and the need for equality in organizations. As a result, the state's employment data will demonstrate an increase in the number of African executives in leadership positions in non-profit organizations.

Analytics from employment and recruitment websites and tracking mechanisms for the training and development programs will highlight the number of African American professional learning opportunities. The outcome will indicate the importance of creating policies on continuous professional development (PD) to enhance leadership skills among African American staff in non-profit organizations. Improvement in leadership skills among African American executives will be the outcome of implementing these proposed solutions.

Implications of the Study

Practical Implications

The findings of this study offer valuable insight to help in addressing the main phenomenon of African American executives' recruitment and retention in non-profit organizations. Leaders in these organizations can leverage the study's findings to implement mentorship programs, providing guidance to African American employees aspiring to leadership positions. These mentorship programs will help equip

African American employees with the leadership skills necessary to navigate the complexities of executive roles within non-profits.

In addition to mentorship, the study highlights the importance of continuous training and development programs. These programs are essential for African American executives to update their leadership skills, ensuring alignment with the ever-evolving non-profit environment. Professional development enhances the competency of African American employees, thereby increasing their chances of being recruited or promoted to leadership positions. Participants in the study emphasized continuous professional development as a key strategy for improving the recruitment and advancement of African American executives.

Beyond these strategies, the study reveals the significant role of intentional success planning in sustaining leadership continuity and organizational success. Succession planning is not merely a process for replacing leaders but a strategic approach to preserving and enhancing the legacy and contribution of current leaders. Effective succession planning ensures that organists are well prepared for leadership transitions, reducing the risk of disruptions and maintaining the momentum of ongoing initiatives. By acknowledging the importance of planning for the future without them at the helm, current leaders can secure the longevity and impact of their work, thereby preserving the organizational mission and vision.

These practical implications contribute to a broader understanding of how non-profit organizations can foster more inclusive and effective leadership pipelines. By adopting these strategies, the organizations not only address the real-world challenges of leadership recruitment and retention but also ensure that their impact on the community is sustained and amplified over time. This phenomenological study, therefore, provides new insights that can be applied to address complex, real-world problems in leadership development, particularly in the context of promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion within the non-profit sector. The intentionality in planning and developing future leaders reflects a commitment to the greater

good, ensuring that the hard work and contributions of today's leaders continue to benefit the community for generations to come.

Implications for Future Research

The sample size of African American executives from one non-profit organization and the homogeneity of the participants in this project call for further research on the lived experiences of African American non-profit executives. As a result, a large sample of African American executives in different non-profit organizations may be required to promote the transferability and generalizability of findings. Another area that may need more research is evaluating the value of African American executives' experiences with particular community services provided by the non-profit organization. Further, to promote ongoing learning and professional development, future researchers should assess the adoption of the recommended solutions. The ongoing investigation could help bridge the critical knowledge gap and guide future research on African American executives in non-profit organizations.

Implications for Leadership Theory and Practice

Proposed solutions indicate the need for collaboration and continued learning for common interests, sharing of knowledge and power, as well as fostering an environment where employees work together to realize a common objective. Leadership theory focuses on determining how leaders excel in their roles, while leadership characteristics focus on the style of the leader and how they interact with their colleagues. Research on leadership has resulted in central themes of influence and power, with both focal points being a common thread (Yukl, 2002). Leaders embrace mentorship through continuous professional development to enhance the leadership skills of African American executives. Ralph Stogdill (1948) studied leadership characteristics and traits, concluding that possessing specific leadership characteristics does not lead to successful and effective leadership.

Leadership that embraces mentorship, engagement with employees, and continuous education and support from family can promote diversity in recruitment and retention in leadership positions and can be

effective in addressing the economic, racial, or gender disparities in leadership. Leadership can create a strong team to foster continuous improvement among African American employees in non-profit organizations who have ambitions to attain leadership positions. Thus, leadership requires effective collaboration to promote equality and diversity in creating new approaches to support African American executives.

Summary of the Dissertation in Practice

This dissertation focused on exploring the lived experiences of African American executives in non-profit organizations, specifically regarding their advancement, influences, and leadership characteristics. Employing a phenomenological research approach ensured that these lived experiences were authentically captured, reflecting the participants' proper perspectives (Moustakas, 1994). The study sought to address the significant gap in research on the leadership journeys of African American executives in non-profit settings by highlighting their narratives and the factors that have shaped their leadership trajectories.

The research, guided by the question, "What lived experiences influence the leadership advancement of African American non-profit executives?" uncovered five key themes through in-depth interviews with 13 executives.

These themes collectively illustrate the complex and multifaceted leadership development journey among African American executives in the non-profit sector. Early career experiences, including mentorship and interim leadership roles, emerged as foundational, providing the skills and the motivation to pursue executive positions. Participants consistently highlighted the importance of service orientation, integrity, and adaptability—central to their leadership effectiveness and success.

Supportive personal and professional relationships, along with prior work experience and educational backgrounds, were identified as critical facilitators that enabled these leaders to ascend to executive roles. However, their journey was full of significant challenges. The executives faced systemic barriers such as

discrimination and socioeconomic obstacles, which required resilience and strong support networks to overcome.

Continuous professional development emerged as a crucial element in their leadership journey, underscoring the need for ongoing learning and growth to navigate leadership complexities and overcome the persistent barriers they encountered. Collectively, these themes provide a comprehensive understanding of the factors that influence the leadership advancement of African American non-profit executives, highlighting the challenges they face and the strategies supporting their success.

The study's results highlight the current challenges and provide a roadmap for future strategies that can significantly enhance leadership skills among African American executives, mainly through continuous professional development and mentorship programs. These findings contribute to a growing body of knowledge crucial for understanding and addressing the unique barriers faced by African American leaders in non-profit organizations. By bringing these lived experiences to the forefront, this research opens up new avenues for creating more inclusive and supportive environments that empower African American executives to thrive.

As research is added to this phenomenon, it has the potential to inspire further studies and initiatives that will continue to dismantle the systemic barriers to leadership advancement. The insights gained here lay a foundation for future efforts to build more equitable and diverse leadership in the non-profit sector, ultimately driving positive change across communities and organizations. I am optimistic that this study will spark ongoing dialogue, inspire actionable strategies, and pave the way for a more inclusive future where African American leaders are supported and celebrated for their contributions to the non-profit world.

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Appendix A

Creighton University

Creighton University Institutional Review Board

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Social-Behavioral Research Informed Consent Template

Research Informed Consent and/or Parental Permission

CREIGHTON UNIVERSITY RESEARCH INFORMED CONSENT

Protocol Title: A PHENOMENOLOGY STUDY EXPLORING THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF AFRICAN AMERICAN NONPROFIT EXECUTIVES.
IRB project number
Principal Investigator: Marcus Johnson, Interdisciplinary Leadership
Principal Investigator's Telephone Number: 708-280-2226
Research Investigators' Names and Departments
Research Coordinators' Names and Departments
24-Hour Telephone Number: 708-280-2226

Study Summary

By using a phenomenological approach, the lived experiences of African American executives in non-profit organizations relevant to their advancement, influences, and leadership characteristics. This study intends to provide qualitative data identifying leadership characteristics that could offer guidance to African Americans aspiring to serve in executive capacities within nonprofit organizations. The focus of this study will be African American nonprofit executives that currently serve or have served at a National Urban League affiliate within the past 5 years.

Important things to know:

- Taking part in research is voluntary. You can choose not to be in this study or stop at any time.
- If you decide not to be in this study, your choice will not affect your relationship with the investigator of this study. There will be no penalty to you.

If you agree to participate in this study;

- A mix of 15, male and female African American nonprofit executives over 18 will be involved in this study.
- The researcher will conduct one hour Zoom video-conference interview with each African American nonprofit executive officer.
- A singular visit is required: a one hour on-line video conference interview.
- These visits will take a total of one hour.
- The potential benefits of participating in this study are:
    - Results from this phenomenological study will provide information about the types of leadership characteristics that may enable organizations to modify succession planning and professional development for African Americans seeking to serve in a nonprofit executive capacity.

    - Results from this phenomenological study may not benefit the participant directly, however the participant may benefit from the opportunity to provide guidance for future African Americans aspiring to executive leadership positions.
- The potential risks to be in this study are:
    - There is no more risk expected from this study than the risks encountered in everyday life. While there may be questions that deal with sensitive issues, participants are freely permitted to refrain from answering any questions. To assure participants' confidentiality is maintained throughout the data collection process, pseudonyms or initials will be used. Additionally, where applicable, any other identifying details from the responses will be removed.

Introduction

You have been selected to participate in this phenomenological research study because you are an African American nonprofit executive that currently serves or has served at a National Urban League affiliate within the past 5 years. I would like to invite you to participate in this phenomenological study on the leadership characteristics of African American nonprofit executives. This video conference interview will last one hour and will be recorded to ensure the accuracy of your story. Your participation is voluntary, and you may stop the interview at any time. All of your responses will remain confidential. Should you have any questions or need additional information about this study, I am available.

Study Purpose and Procedures

The purpose of this phenomenological research study is to explore the leadership characteristics of African American nonprofit executives. By using a phenomenological research approach, the lived experiences of African American nonprofit executives will provide qualitative data that could offer best practices for succession planning and professional development for African Americans seeking to serve in a nonprofit executive capacity. The focus of this study will be African American nonprofit executives that currently serve or have served at a National Urban League affiliate within the past 5 years.

If you volunteer to participate in this study, you will be asked the following:

1. Select a date and time for the interview
2. The informed consent will be explained to you and you will be asked to provide and electronic signature prior to the interview.
3. An interview protocol will be shared with you prior to the interview.
4. The Zoom video-conference interview will take place. Approximately one hour will be required.
5. If more time is needed, a second interview will take place utilizing the same format.
6. The video will be transcribed by a transcriber. All information will remain confidential.
7. A copy of the transcribed document will be sent to you via email for member checking. You will be allotted two weeks to add, change, or check for accuracy in the transcripts.
8. You will be provided a final copy of the dissertation.

Benefits of Participating in the Study

Nonprofit executive turnover is detrimental to the vitality of organizations if not strategically addressed. Results from this phenomenological study will provide information about the types of leadership characteristics that may enable organizations to modify succession planning and professional development for African Americans seeking to serve in a nonprofit executive capacity. Results from this phenomenological study may not benefit the participant directly, however the participant may benefit from the opportunity to provide guidance for future African Americans aspiring to executive leadership positions.

Risks of Participating in the Study

There is no more risk expected from this study than the risks encountered in everyday life. While there may be questions that deal with sensitive issues, participants may at any time refrain from answering any questions. To assure participants of confidentiality throughout the data collection process, pseudonyms or initials will be used, and any other identifying details from the responses will be removed. A possible risk involved in this study, is the potential social and psychological risks associated with accidental disclosure of confidential information from the data collected throughout the study. Methods of storing and securing data are designed to minimize this risk.

Confidentiality

We will do everything we can to keep your records confidential. However, it cannot be guaranteed. We may need to report certain information to agencies as required by law. The records we collect identifying you as a participant will be maintained and stored. To maintain the integrity of the data, the interview data will be stored on an external hard-drive, kept under double-lock and key in a secure location, and kept confidential for five years after the research is concluded. At the conclusion of that initial five years, this data will be destroyed.

Records that identify you and this consent form signed by you may be looked at by others. The list of people who may look at your research records are:

- The investigator and his or her research staff and students
- The Creighton University Institutional Review Board (IRB) and other internal departments that provide support and oversight at Creighton University (add if research is done at any of these facilities: Creighton University, Missouri Valley Cancer Consortium, or CHI- Health or other as per your protocol)

We may present the research findings at professional meetings or publish the results of this research study in relevant journals. However, we will always keep your name and other identifying information private.

Disclosure of Appropriate Alternatives

- Participants may also be interviewed in-person if possible.
- Another alternative would be to choose not to participate.

Compensation for Participation

- There is no compensation for this research.

Contact Information

Marcus Johnson

marcusjohnson@creighton.edu

SIGNATURE CLAUSE

You are free to refuse to participate in this research project or to withdraw your consent and discontinue participation in the project at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled, or any effect on your medical care.

My signature below indicates that all my questions have been answered. I agree to participate in the project as described above.

_____

Printed Name of (person signing)

_____ _____

Signature of (person signing) Date Signed

The Creighton University Institutional Review Board (IRB) offers you an opportunity (anonymously if you so choose) to discuss problems, concerns, and questions; obtain information; or offer input about this project with an IRB administrator who is not associated with this particular research project. You may call or write to the Institutional Review Board at (402) 280-2126; address the letter to the Institutional Review Board, Creighton University, 2500 California Plaza, Omaha, NE 68178 or by email at irb@creighton.edu.

A copy of this signed form has been generated provided via email

For the Research Investigator—I have discussed with this participant (and, if required, the participant's guardian) the procedure(s) described above and the risks involved; I believe he/she understands the contents of the consent document and is competent to give legally effective and informed consent.

(insert signature)

Marcus E. Johnson, EdD Candidate

Appendix B

Bill of Rights for Research Participants

As a participant in a research study, you have the right:

1. To have enough time to decide whether or not to be in the research study, and to make that decision without any pressure from the people who are conducting the research.

2. To refuse to be in the study at all, or to stop participating at any time after you begin the study.

3. To be told what the study is trying to find out, what will happen to you, and what you will be asked to do if you are in the study.

4. To be told about the reasonably foreseeable risks of being in the study.

5. To be told about the possible benefits of being in the study.

6. To be told whether there are any costs associated with being in the study, and whether you will be compensated for participating in the study.

7. To be told who will have access to information collected about you and how your confidentiality will be protected.

8. To be told whom to contact with questions about the research, about research-related injury, and about your rights as a research participant.

9. If the study involves treatment or therapy:

    a. To be told about the other non-research treatment choices you have.

    b. To be told where treatment is available should you have a research-related injury, and who will pay for research-related treatment.

Appendix C

Interview Protocol: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY EXPLORING THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF AFRICAN AMERICAN NON-PROFIT EXECUTIVES.
Time of Interview:
Date:
Place:
Interviewer: Marcus Johnson
Interviewee:
Position of Interviewee:

Introduction/Welcome

Hello, my name is Marcus Johnson, and I am a doctoral student at Creighton University in the department of Interdisciplinary Leadership. I am currently conducting a study aiming to bridge the underrepresentation of African American leadership in non-profit organizations by exploring the lived experiences and challenges faced by executives like you in these roles. I'm particularly interested in understanding your personal journey of leadership advancement, the influences that have shaped your path, and the unique characteristics you've developed as a leader in the non-profit sector.

Our conversation today will provide invaluable qualitative data for this study, potentially offering best practices and strategies for succession planning, professional development, and the retention of African American leadership in non-profit organizations. Your insights will contribute to filling a research gap and fostering a more inclusive leadership environment within the non-profit sector.

This interview is estimated to last about an hour. With your permission, I would like to record our conversation to ensure all of your insights are captured accurately. Your participation is entirely voluntary, and you can choose to stop the interview at any point.

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview. If it's alright with you, could I begin recording our conversation for transcription purposes? (Wait for response)

Thank you.

Questions:

Life History.

1. Tell me about your professional role serving at a nonprofit organization? (Years you have held your position, etc.)
2. When did you decide that you wanted to serve at a nonprofit organization?

Career Path.

1. How did you become interested in becoming a leader?
2. Please describe the experiences that impacted you the most during your career path.
    a. What advice do you have for aspiring African American nonprofit leaders?
3. Tell me the story of how you became an executive officer.
4. What factors helped you achieve your current position?
    a. What personal or career decisions have you made to get you or got you to your nonprofit executive leadership position?

Leadership.

1. What are some characteristics that define effective leadership in a non-profit organization?
2. How do/did you prioritize professional development for yourself?
3. How would you define your leadership style?
4. Can you describe a time when you were directly involved in managing your organization through a challenging time?
    a. What lessons have you learned as an African American in a nonprofit leadership position?

Lived Experiences.

1. Did you experience any challenges personally?
2. Tell me the story of how you became an executive officer.
    a. What do you think you bring to being a nonprofit executive of which are you most proud of?
3. What did or have you learned about yourself from your experience as a nonprofit executive?

Closing Question.

1. Is there anything else that you would like to add about any of the topics that we have discussed or other areas that we did not discuss, but you think are important?

Thank you for your time and participation in this interview. The information that you provided will be beneficial in this project.

Appendix D

Outlook

ACKNOWLEDGED Submission #2004114-01

From Betsy Dancisak <betsydancisak@creighton.edu>

Date Fri 8/18/2023 10:22 AM

To Johnson, Marcus E <MarcusJohnson@creighton.edu>

To improve turnaround times for investigators, the IRB is transitioning from hardcopy (PDF) to electronic (email) determination letters.

If you need a hardcopy determination letter (to provide to a sponsor, grant funder, or outside IRB, etc.) please notify the IRB by sending an email to IRB@creighton.edu. To ensure prompt attention to your request, please use "Request for Hardcopy Approval Letter for Protocol 200XXXX" in the subject line of your email and include the complete protocol number for your study. **Unless you request a hardcopy approval letter for your submission from the IRB, the communication below will serve as documentation of IRB review and approval. You may save a copy of this email as a PDF and retain it with your study file as necessary**.

DETERMINATION DATE: 18-Aug-2023

TO: Marcus Johnson

FROM: Social & Behavioral IRB

PROJECT TITLE: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY EXPLORING THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF AFRICAN AMERICAN NON-PROFIT EXECUTIVES.

REVIEW CATEGORY: Exempt

RISK LEVEL: Minimal Risk SUBMISSION #:
2004114-01

SUBMISSION TYPE: Initial Application REVIEW
METHOD: Exempt DETERMINATION: Exempt

Thank you for your Initial Application submission materials for this project. The following items were reviewed in this submission:

- Protocol
- Subject facing materials

This project has been determined to be exempt from Federal Policy for Protection of Human Subjects as per 45 CFR 46.104(d)(2)(iii).

All protocol amendments and changes must be submitted to the IRB and may not be implemented until acknowledged by the IRB. Please use the modification form when submitting changes.

PLEASE NOTE: Effective March 1, 2023, the IRB will ONLY be stamping consent documents and HIPAA authorizations for EXPEDITED STUDIES. Information letters, recruitment items, and all other subject facing materials for EXEMPT studies will no longer be stamped by the IRB. It is the responsibility of the Principal Investigator to ensure that only IRB approved documents are used to conduct research.

If you have any questions, please contact the IRB Office at 402-280-2126 or irb@creighton.edu. Please include your project title and number in all correspondence with the office.