



DISSERTATION APPROVED BY

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A TRIFECTA? EXPLORING THE INTERSECTION OF RACE, GENDER, AND  
DISABILITY ON THE CAREER ADVANCEMENT EFFORTS OF COLLEGE-  
EDUCATED AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN WITH PHYSICAL DISABILITIES

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By  
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A DISSERTATION IN PRACTICE

Submitted to the faculty of the Graduate School of Creighton University in Partial  
Fulfillment of the Requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education in  
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### **Abstract**

College-educated African American women with physical disabilities can be a rich human resource for organizations and a population from which leaders can be shaped and promoted. This interpretative phenomenological approach study sought to examine the experiences of a set of African American college-educated women with physical disabilities to understand their experiences and possible reasons why this population experiences challenges to their career development. The study specifically sought to examine whether the intersection of race, gender, and disability played a role in career advancement. The study participants identified singular, combination, and sometimes shifting combinations of identities of race, gender, and disability as having an influence on their career growth. Further they discussed various supports and barriers to their career development. Several also identified disability as the identity that most affected their career advancement. Based on the findings from the study, several practical recommendations are suggested, together with the identification of necessary stakeholders, and establishment of relevant timelines for implementation.

*Keywords:* race, gender, disability, intersectionality, career advancement, career growth, career supports, career barriers

## **Dedication**

This dissertation is dedicated to my parents, Dr. Mack and Mrs. Barbara Scott, who taught their African American daughter with a physical disability being differently abled was not a limitation on what she could dream or the achievement of those dreams.

## Acknowledgements

My dissertation process has not been a solo performance. Instead, it has been a concerted effort of many. Thank you to Dr. Kathryn Winter, my committee chair and rehearsal director, who provided invaluable direction, advice, and perspective. My appreciation to Dr. Sarah Walker, who agreed to serve on my committee and continued to do so even after her new appointment as Vice Provost - Office of Institutional Diversity and Inclusion. Thank you to Dr. Leah Georges, my advisor, and the faculty and staff in the Interdisciplinary Leadership program. They were my section leaders, who helped prepare me along the journey. Thanks to my dissertation writing group, Dr. Jennifer Moss Breen Kuzelka, Dr. Pamela McAfee, Dr. Ophelia Morgan, Dr. Alissa Bell, Dr. Cara Aghajanian, Dr. Anthony Houston, Mr. Kevin Kane, and Mrs. Andrea Lehr, as well as Mrs. Meagan McCulley and Mrs. Katherine “Kat” Folk, my fellow choristers who worked together with me to perfect the performance. Much appreciation to Dr. Kimberly Henderson and Dr. Pamela Carter Nolan, my vocal coaches, who rehearsed with me for the final performance. Appreciation as well to Dr. Millicent Gorham, the concertmaster who helped me identify persons for the study and my research participants who provided the lyrics for the performance. I also want to thank my patrons, who provided moral support, the BRB Book Club and platinum level patrons, my family, especially my sister Mrs. Cristi Scott Ligon (my fiercest advocate), and my parents Dr. Mack T. and the late Mrs. Barbara Scott who made sure I had the tools to perfect my gifts. Finally, my greatest thanks to the conductor of this performance, my heavenly Father. He orchestrated it all. To God Be All the Glory!

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## RACE, GENDER, DISABILITY AND CAREER PROGRESSION

### CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Scholars and practitioners recognize diversity within the workforce can be beneficial to organizational health (Herring, 2009). Organizations can derive numerous benefits from a workforce that is diverse with respect to race, ethnicity, age, and gender, such as innovation, reduction of groupthink (Herring, 2009), and organizational flexibility (Cox & Blake, 1991). Creating a diverse workforce is not the end goal. Rather, inclusion of diverse populations within an organization's fabric produces positive organizational results (Scott et al., 2011).

The development of a social model of disability emerged toward the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Hughes, 2010) and it was after this point researchers began examining the unique experiences of individuals as a function of their (dis)ability. This dissertation investigated how three individual elements of diversity - race, gender, and disability - intersect in the lived experiences of college-educated African American women with physical disabilities as they seek to advance their careers.

#### **Statement of the Problem**

The US Census Bureau reported that disabled persons (civilian and noninstitutionalized) comprise 12.7 % of the US population with women being more likely to have a disability than men, and African Americans having higher rates of disabilities than several other races (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019). Disabled persons also make up a significant portion (21.3%) of the U.S. workforce (Bureau of Labor Statistics, n.d.). Notwithstanding their numbers in the workforce, disabled employees often encounter structural/architectural access impediments, discrimination, and attitudes of ableism that impact their career growth (Procknow et al., 2017; Noonan et al., 2004).

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Scholars have also identified several barriers African Americans experience to upward mobility in their careers. Among those barriers are overt discrimination (James, 2000), a requirement to be more qualified than non-African Americans (Lewis, 2016), and lack of social networks (Ibarra, 1995). Similarly, women face challenges in advancing their careers. Reasons given for these difficulties include overqualification compared to men (Williams, 2014) and lack of role models, mentors, and social networks (Chen et al., 2010). Exclusion from informal social networks and limited access to resources (Combs, 2003), scarcity of mentors (Crawford & Smith, 2005), limited promotional potential, and negative race-based stereotypes (Reynolds-Dobbs et al., 2008) are some of the barriers African American women face in progressing their careers.

While scholars have explored the impact of racism, sexism, and ableism as singular impacts on career growth, there is a paucity of scholarly review of how these three identities intersect in the lives of African American women with disabilities to influence career advancement. Recent research includes a few studies that have looked at aspects of work and economic impact. For instance, Bailey and Mobley (2019) suggested a Black feminist disability framework as a lens into the overall experiences for this population. They suggested applying such a perspective to, among other things, reexamining the concept of work. Likewise, Miles (2019) studied the intersection of race, gender, and disability on homeownership and discovered that the opportunity for homeownership revealed themes regarding self-concepts held by African American women with disabilities. Using both Black feminist and disability studies frameworks, Cheatham (2015) explored the intersection of race, sex, disability, and economic and social disparities suffered by disabled African American mothers.

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These studies are instructive but are not directly focused on experiences in career advancement. This study sought to expand on the body of research regarding the individual impact of race, gender, and disability by examining the intersection of these three social identities on career advancement. Specifically, this study examined the lived experiences of college-educated African American women with physical disabilities seeking to advance their chosen careers.

One purpose of the study was to seek an understanding of the career paths of the women in this study to provide insight into why there is a scarcity of African American women with disabilities in leadership and decision-making roles. By highlighting through the lived experiences of African American women with physical disabilities the impediments to obtaining leadership positions, this study may also help inform those who decide what leadership opportunities to offer to whom to be more open to the leadership potential of persons in this population.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the intersectionality of gender, race, and disability on career progression for college-educated African American women with physical disabilities who live in Washington, DC and the surrounding metropolitan area.

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions guided this qualitative study.

1. How do college-educated African American women with physical disabilities make sense of how race, gender, and disability intersect in their lived experiences to affect career progression?

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2. How does the intersection of race, gender, and disability affect the supports or barriers African American women with physical disabilities receive or encounter as they navigate their careers?

### **Aim Statement**

This study aimed to identify strategies to address any identified barriers to career progression for African American women with physical disabilities. The research also supports an additional aim – to broaden the understanding of decision makers of the challenges African American women with physical disabilities face in advancing their careers.

### **Definition of Relevant Terms**

The following terms were used operationally within this study.

*Ableism* – Ableism is a hierarchical concept that assumes ablebodiedness is the default human state (Neilson, 2020). This study used Campbell’s (2001) description of ableism as “a network of beliefs, processes and practices that produces a particular kind of self and body (the corporeal standard) that is projected as the perfect, species-typical and therefore essential and fully human” (p.44).

*Career Progression* - Career progression is defined as upward changes in reward and position levels and includes salary increases and the number of promotions (Stroh et al., 1992).

*Civilian noninstitutional population* – Civilian noninstitutionalized is a category used by United States agencies. It defines a population of persons who are not on active duty and are not residing in institutions consisting “primarily of nursing homes, prisons, jails, mental hospitals, and juvenile correctional facilities” (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021).

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*Disability* – The term disability has many definitions. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations, 2006) recognizes disability as an evolving concept. The United Nations includes in the description of disabled persons "those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others" (United Nations, 2006, p. 4). This study used the United Nations Convention definition but focuses on physical impairments, both visible and imperceptible.

*Diversity* – Diversity definitions focus on heterogeneity and demographic makeup (Roberson, 2006). In this study, diversity was defined as "the varied perspectives and approaches to work that members of different identity groups bring" (Thomas & Ely, 1996, p. 80).

*Inclusion* – While related to diversity, inclusion centers on integration (Roberson, 2006). Inclusion for this study meant "the extent to which individuals can access information and resources, are involved in work groups, and have the ability to influence decision-making processes" (Roberson, 2006, p.215; Mor Barak & Cherin (1998)).

*Intersectionality* - Intersectionality has numerous definitions, can describe a theory (Collins, 2015), or serve as the bases for an activist agenda (Moradi & Grzanka, 2017). For this study, intersectionality was defined as "intersecting power relations [that] influence social relations across diverse societies as well as individual experiences in everyday life" (Collins & Bilge, 2020, p. 1).

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### **Methodology Overview**

This study used a qualitative approach, premised on a transformative framework, to explore the experiences of diverse and traditionally marginalized groups (Mertens, 2010). This study relied on an interpretative phenomenological analysis approach (IPA) (Miller et al., 2018) with a purposive sample (Creswell & Poth, 2018) to discover and interpret the lived experiences of college-educated African American women with physical disabilities in advancing their careers. Phenomenological studies use interviews, observations, and artifacts to collect data. This study used all three of these methods to collect data from the study population of college-educated African-American women with physical disabilities over the age of 25 living in the Washington, DC, metropolitan area. The research focused on the effect of intersectionality on career growth for this demographic. The study also investigated what barriers, if any, study participants have encountered and what kind of help they have had, such as mentors, to achieve their career goals.

Data analysis for the study consisted of an emerging code analysis instead of predetermined codes (Saldana, 2016). From the themes that surfaced from the data, I used a narrative analysis to represent the derived themes.

### **Delimitations**

In proposing the parameters for this research, I made several choices that are delimitations for the study. First, I limited the study to a particular population. The study looked at race as an intersecting factor in career progression. However, the study was limited to African Americans. Studying other racial groups, e.g., Latinos, Asian

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Americans, or Native Americans, may yield different lived experiences than African Americans.

Disability is also a demographic characteristic included in the intersectionality analysis. This study was limited to physical disabilities. Persons with learning (Luria et al., 2014) or psychiatric disabilities (Russinova et al., 2018) may have different experiences pursuing career opportunities than persons with a physical disability. These differences may be significant. Consequently, these differences may mean conclusions derived from an exploration of physically disabled persons' experiences may have limited, if any, applicability to career advancement for persons with other types of disabilities.

Gender in this study was limited to cisgender women. Transgender women represent another identity, the intersection with race and disability of which could impact their career development. However, the lived experiences of transgender women may be significantly different than those of cisgender women. Furthermore, the reasons for these different experiences may be unrelated to gender, which was one of the foci of this study.

Geography was also a delimiting factor for the study. I drew the sample for the study from Washington, DC, and the surrounding area. That area has a large, stable employer - the federal government. Study participants who reside in smaller urban areas, rural areas, or areas with fewer employers may have different employment prospects and career advancement opportunities.

Age was also a delimiter for this study. Only persons 25 years or older were eligible to participate in the study. This minimum age for study participants was based on

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providing participants both the opportunity to finish college and some period to acquire experiences in advancing their careers.

### **Limitations**

This study used a qualitative approach to discover behaviors and social circumstances (Gelo et al., 2008) that have supported and challenged career growth for an identified population. While qualitative methods, like the phenomenological approach utilized for this study, can garner a depth of information regarding participant experiences, the study results are not generalizable to other populations. Also, qualitative studies are not designed to demonstrate cause and effect. Accordingly, while this study's results can be used to understand the expressed behaviors and experiences of the sample, the results cannot be used to predict behaviors or experiences for populations beyond the sample in the study.

### **Personal Biases**

In an IPA based phenomenological approach, the researcher is essential to the interpretative process (Larkin & Thompson, 2011). To mitigate the bias that might arise from this participation, I employed mechanisms to increase my findings' reliability and validity. Creswell and Creswell (2018) suggest several tools that can mitigate personal bias, including triangulation and member checking. I used both of these mechanisms in the study. Furthermore, I utilized open-ended questions during my interviews to allow interviewees to tell their stories without me leading them toward expected or desired answers.

Finally, I am a member of the studied demographic - an African American, college-educated woman with a physical disability. Throughout my career, I have

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contemplated whether my race, gender, disability, or a combination thereof has influenced decision makers positively or negatively regarding my advancement opportunities. Specifically, I wondered whether with my membership in these three groups was viewed as a triple asset or triple threat. My experiences served as part of my interest in exploring this research area.

### **Reflections of the Scholar-Practitioner**

I began my dissertation journey without a firm commitment to any research area. I contemplated exploring issues in corporate governance and a variety of leadership issues related to non-profit boards. While I remain interested in those topics, I was not passionate about those subjects. During one of my classes, several factors converged that set me on my final dissertation path. First, I stumbled upon the theoretical concept of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989). Second, I realized through my research, I could develop tools to equip persons considered a triple threat to be recognized instead as a triple asset. Third, I realized my own life experiences as a college-educated African American woman with a physical disability could help me better investigate similarly situated women's experiences.

Lastly, this topic allows me to use my skills as a social engineer (Mawakana, 2011). At the Howard University School of Law, where I obtained my law degree, I was taught that as a lawyer I could be a parasite on society or a social engineer. As a social engineer, I have the responsibility to use my skills to help those, many of whom may be disadvantaged or marginalized, to solve problems, better the conditions in which they live, and obtain justice. It is my hope that this research has helped me meet these responsibilities.

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I have learned I enjoy being a researcher. This revelation is not unexpected, given one of my leadership strengths themes is a Learner (*Executing CliftonStrengths Themes*, n.d.). I have already begun considering ways to employ my love for research after my dissertation journey is complete.

Finally, I am developing a research philosophy. I am exploring different philosophical assumptions. I am especially contemplating the epistemological underpinnings of my research focus. I believe research can help improve people's lives. Given this perspective, a transformative paradigm serves as the interpretive framework for my research interests (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Within that framework, I am most interested in studying and addressing issues surrounding access, discrimination, and other social struggles. This discovery aligns with my life-long desire to address social justice and civil rights issues.

### **Summary**

Through an intersectionality framework, scholars exploring societal phenomena have studied how race and gender intersect within the employment cycle. Notwithstanding the addition of disability into the diversity conversation, significant opportunities still exist for research that probes further intersecting relationships between disability, gender, and race and their effect on employment issues. This study used a qualitative, phenomenological approach to investigate how these three demographics intersect to impact career advancement. Adding disability to the intersectionality discussion can help create a greater understanding of disabled co-workers that can reduce stigmatization which often leads to decreased leadership opportunities for disabled workers. Moreover, given the considerable number of persons who are or may become

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disabled, additional research can assist organizations of all types in taking advantage of the leadership talent of disabled employees and reaping the full benefits of a diverse and inclusive workforce.

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### **CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW**

This literature review explored scholarly research on the intersection of race, gender, and disability and how that intersection affects career progression for African American women with physical disabilities. Further, the literature review addressed the support received and the barriers encountered by this demographic. This review begins with a discussion of the theoretical frameworks that underlie the study followed by an examination of how disability is understood, including different definitions and theoretical models of disability. The review of relevant research sought to understand disability through the related concepts of ableism and othering. This literature review also expounded on intersectionality, both as a theoretical construct and the underpinnings of an activism agenda. Given the study's focus, I specifically chronicled research on the intersection of race, gender, and disability. Finally, the literature review discussed career advancement, supports therefore, and barriers thereto based on race, gender, and disability.

#### **Theoretical Frameworks**

Theoretical frameworks provide the blueprint for research as they serve as a basis for identifying the problem studied, framing the research question, formulating the methodology, and analyzing the data gathered (Grant & Osanloo, 2014). The overarching framework for this study is a transformative framework. A transformative framework is premised on the assertion that knowledge is not neutral. Rather knowledge reflects “the power and social relationships within society, and the purpose of knowledge construction is to aid people to improve society” (Sweetman et al., 2010, p. 442).

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A transformative framework serves as an umbrella for critical frameworks including critical race theory, Black feminist thought, and disability studies. Critical race theory grew out of legal scholars' assertions that laws within our legal system are not race neutral (Bell, 1995). Instead, in the view of these scholars, race is a social construct and racism is ingrained into the culture of the United States (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Black feminist thought "consists of ideas produced by Black women that clarify a standpoint of and for Black women" (Collins, 1986, p. S16). Themes that underscore Black feminist thought include the importance of self-definition and self-valuation, the interlocking nature of oppression, and a focus on African American women culture (Collins, 1986). Disability studies, like critical race theory, considers disability as a social construct (Ben-Moshe & Magana, 2014). Scholars utilizing a disability studies approach not only identify the variation in the human condition but the meanings that are attached to those differences (Linton, 1998).

All three of these analytical frameworks, critical race theory, Black feminist thought, and disability studies, are reflected in the primary theory for this study – intersectionality. As discussed more specifically below, intersectionality captures the reality that systems of inequality are interdependent such that "social identities cannot be studied independently of one another, nor separately from the processes that maintain inequality" like racism, sexism, and ableism (Warner & Shields, 2013, p. 804). Specifically, germane to this study were the works of Bailey and Mobley (2019) and Love (2019) who used intersection-based frameworks to explore issues affecting African American women with disabilities.

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### **Understanding Disability**

#### **Definitions of Disability**

There is not a universally understood definition of disability. In fact, scholars debate the appropriate terminology to use, employing terms such as disable, dis/abled, and people with disabilities. For the purposes of this study, I used the terms “disability” and “people with disabilities” to describe the concept of disability.

Scholars have generally described disability as “preventing or slowing action, as an atypical function, a lack of independence, and as a socially constructed obstacle (Friedman & Aleksa, 2017, p. digital). The U. S. Census Bureau's definition of disability includes physical conditions such as deafness, blindness, mobility limitations, difficulty with self-care, and difficulty concentrating or making decisions based on a physical, emotional, or mental impairment and difficulty with independent living (U. S. Census Bureau, 2017).

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006) recognizes disability as an evolving concept. Still, it includes in the definition of disabled persons “those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others” (United Nations, 2006, p. 4). The Americans with Disability Act (ADA) of 1994 (amended 2008) protects persons who currently have or have had a record of impairments which substantially limit major life functions and persons who are thought to have such limitations (Befort, 2010).

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Related to the definition of disability are the concepts of ableism and othering (Mik-Meyer, 2016). Like disability, ableism has several meanings. One definition posited by Campbell (2001) describes ableism as “a network of beliefs, processes, and practices that produces a particular kind of self and body (the corporeal standard) that is projected as the perfect, species-typical and therefore essential and fully human” (p.44). Others characterize ablebodiedness as the standard for humanity and ableism as practices that treat people as invisible and less than human (Neilson, 2020) when they avoid or actively exclude persons with disabilities (Nario-Redmond & Kemerling, 2019). Still another definition concentrates on the impact of ableism as “stereotyping, prejudice, discrimination, and social oppression toward people with disabilities” (Bogart & Dunn, 2019, p. 651).

Ableism operates to produce different outcomes for persons characterized as “the other” (Williams & Mavin, 2012). Ableism identifies ablebodiedness as the standard or norm of being human (Silva & Howe, 2019). While sometimes resulting in benevolence (Nario-Redmond & Kemerling, 2019), ableism is often a constant message to persons with disabilities that they are to be tolerated as persons who are less than their abled-bodied counterparts (Campbell, 2009). Ableism results in a social construct that marginalizes disabled persons (Williams & Mavin, 2012) and subjects disabled persons to adverse treatment because of the cultural-rooted beliefs that only ablebodiedness is normatively acceptable (Wolbring, 2012).

Othering is also a conceptual lens for understanding the behavior of the abled toward people with disabilities. One scholar described sociological othering as “the process of attaching moral codes of inferiority to difference” (Krumer-Nevo

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& Sidi, 2012, p. 300). Otherism is not limited to treatment of people with disabilities. Overboe (1999) explained otherism as a social relation that is often seen from a hierarchical and binary viewpoint. One state is considered the normal or “the one” and the other state less than normal or abnormal – the “other.” This relationship is unequal as the characteristics of “the one” are deemed desirable and superior to the characteristics of “the other” (Brons, 2015). For those with disabilities, othering can be hostile or benevolent. Whether meant for good or evil, othering can result in ableist attitudes (Mik-Meyer, 2016) that may cause loss of career opportunities for disabled persons.

### **Theoretical Models of Disability**

Some assert disabled persons make up the largest “minority” (Bogart & Dunn, 2019). Scholars and activists who support a “minority model” of disability liken the treatment of persons with disabilities to racism based on the discrimination and prejudice disabled persons experience (Frederick & Shifrer, 2019). However, disability has not always been considered a separate societal category to be examined or understood (Davis, 1999). Olkin (2002) in her discourse on including disability in diversity, outlined how there are similarities and differences between persons with disabilities and other minority groups. She argued minority groups are defined by experiences of discrimination and oppression, and by the insistence minorities emulate the majority culture. In this way, persons with disabilities are similar to other minorities. On the other hand, persons with disabilities often need accommodations that set them apart from abled colleagues. These necessities are unrelated to the traditional concepts of prejudice and stigma that attach to other minority groups.

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In addition to the various definitions of disability and the debate of whether persons with disabilities are part of a minority group, researchers have used different models to discuss disability, including moral, medical, and rehabilitation paradigms (Kaplan, 2000). The moral model associates disability with sin and guilt (Drimmer, 1993). The medical model characterizes disability as a spoiled identity resulting from an individual deficit (Williams & Mavin (2012); Scullion (2010)). The rehabilitative model emphasizes cures and helping to fix deficiencies (Drimmer, 1993). Viewing disability from this perspective focuses responses on compensating for impairment rather than integration into social structures (Williams & Mavin, 2012).

In the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, the social model of disability emerged (Hughes, 2010). Under this model, disabled persons are not believed to be defective but rather are considered normal persons subjected to economic, attitudinal, and architectural barriers which limit their functioning in society (Goering, 2015). It is not the impairment that causes disability but social reactions to impairments that characterize persons as abnormal.

However, some social model theorists assert that impairment and disability share a complex relationship between impairment effects and the social reactions to those effects (Swain et al., 2003). Others argue that the social model of disability reduces the analytical discussion to social oppression claims without recognizing biological factors of disability (Anastasiou & Kaufman, 2013). Still, others assert the social model is not uniformly understood. Rather, there are various forms of the social model with a United Kingdom version concentrating on social oppression and a US model centering on disability as a minority designation (Owens, 2015).

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Still more disability models exist. Retief and Letšosa (2018) provided a brief overview of six disability models in addition to the moral, medical, and social models. Specifically, they highlighted the identity/affirmation (Swain & French, 2000), the human rights (Degener, 2017), culture (Synder & Mitchell, 2006), economic (Smart, 2004), charity (Henderson & Bryan, 2011), and limits (Creamer, 2012) models.

The various definitions of disability and the numerous models that seek to frame scholarship into its various dimensions are reflective of the fluid nature of disability as a social category. Moreover, while some currently meet a recognized definition, all persons have the potential to become disabled causing one scholar to describe herself as temporarily able (Bogart & Dunn, 2019). The fluidity around the concept of disability complicates the development of a collective social identity that helps drive sociopolitical action to address issues of discrimination and marginalization for this population (Marato et al., 2019).

### **Intersectionality**

At the Women's Right Convention in 1851, Sojourner Truth, a formerly enslaved woman, posited the question – Ain't I a woman, too – and raised for a country struggling with both civil and women's rights a question of how being a woman and being African American intersect (Truth, *Ain't I a Woman, Too?*, 1851). More than one hundred years later, a group of Black feminists in 1977, the Combahee River Collective, echoed Sojourner Truth's question and began a discourse on the interrelatedness of race, class, and gender (Combahee River Collective, 1995). In their position paper, this community of Black feminists argued that various factors such as racism, sexism, classism, and sexuality-based biases collectively affect the lives of African American women. They

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argued that an integrated analysis is therefore necessary to address these interlocking systems of oppression.

Since then, more scholars have explored the intersection of race and gender. Cole (2009) provides a chronology of this scholarship where she and others give credit to Crenshaw (1989) for coining the term intersectionality. Crenshaw (1989) initially reflected on the legal consequences of two separate social identities. She described intersectionality as the many ways “in which race and gender interact to shape multiple dimensions of Black women’s employment experiences” (p. 139). She argued that African American women's experiences are multidimensional, and viewing their experiences from a single axis framework inappropriately discounts their experiences by only recognizing a subset of those experiences. In their later work, Sanchez-Hucles & Davis (2010) supported the conclusion that single dynamics ineffectually describes the complexity of leadership experiences of women of color.

### **Intersectionality as a Theoretical Construct**

Cole (2009) argues that intersectionality should be studied as a means of understanding how social categories conjointly influence outcomes. One such outcome is ethnic minority women may experience intersectional invisibility because they may be viewed as non-prototypical members of their racial and gender-based groups. In other words, they are not considered prototypical as women in men’s groups or African American in White-based groups (Purdie-Vaughns & Eibach, 2008). Crenshaw (1989) identifies other outcomes such as African American women experiencing double discrimination based on race and gender.

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Collins and Bilge (2020) identified six core themes as the underpinnings for intersectionality inquiry – social inequality, intersecting power relations, social context, relationality, complexity, and social justice. While this multi-dimensional view has its origins in Black feminist thought (Crenshaw, 1989), intersectional analysis is not limited to research regarding social phenomena experienced by African American women. Rather, an intersectional analytical framework has application to other “multiple sociocultural identities within an individual that contribute to unique experiences of power and privilege” (Mizock & Hopwood, 2016, p. 93).

### **Intersectionality as a Platform for Activism**

Intersectionality is both structural and political (Jordan-Zachery, 2007). Structural intersectionality centers on the intersectional impact of inequalities in individual lives (Choo & Ferree, 2010). This component aligns with the theoretical framework discussed above. Political intersectionality, however, focuses on the effects of inequalities and their connections to political strategies. Gordon (2016) discussed how intersectionality and social feminism converge in contemporary activism while Collins and Bilge (2020) asserted that social inequality is the “fundamental object of investigation for intersectionality” (p. 224). Within the field of counseling psychology, Moradi and Grzanka (2017) encouraged scholarly research purposed to support social transformation. Roberts and Jesudason (2013) shifted the focus of inquiry from intersections that impact individuals to argue intersectional analysis can be used to help form alliances between marginalized groups to improve effectiveness in working toward social justice that benefits the allied groups (Roberts & Jesudason, 2013).

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### **Criticisms and Challenges to Intersectionality**

May (2014) declared that “intersectionality challenges the pull of prevailing mindsets, in part by drawing from political expectations, lived experiences, and analytic positions not crafted solely within the bounds of dominant imaginaries” (p.96).

Notwithstanding this declaration and the wide use of the term intersectionality to describe a multitude of social interactions, some scholars question the utility of an intersectionality-based theory. For example, Gordon (2016) discussed whether focusing on the additive/conjunctive aspect of intersectionality resulted in diminishing the strength of efforts to address problems to the lowest common denominator. Other critics posited imprecise definitions of intersectionality create uneven outcomes in its application (Collins & Bilge, 2020). Similarly, Delgado (2011) warned that because social categories can be infinitely divided, the impact of intersectionality can be paralyzed by the fear that some group will be left out of consideration of the phenomena studied (Delgado, 2011). He raised additional potential weaknesses of intersectionality including asserting the theory’s focus on the individual victims of discrimination or oppression shifts the attention off of the perpetrators thereby reducing the social justice aim of intersectionality. Some scholars challenged the quality of the intersectionality as a theory based on concerns with how to measure intersectional impact (McCall, 2005; but see Bright et al., 2016).

Notwithstanding these concerns, intersectionality remains a viable framework to explore the lived experiences of African American women with physical disabilities. An intersectional approach recognizes that these three social identities, race, gender, and

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disability, may individually or in an integrated way contribute to what this population may experience on their career journeys.

### **Intersectionality of Race, Gender, and Disability**

After Crenshaw's (1989) discussion of the multiple dimensions of race and gender and the societal impact on African American women, scholars began to explore the intersection of race and gender. Jordan-Zachery (2007) in her essay describes intersectionality as a "politics of survival" for African American women. Rosette et al. (2016) recognized race and gender as social categories whose influence on employment are additive and intersectional. In a second discussion of intersectionality, Rosette et al. (2016) discussed the interaction of racial stereotypes and agentic deficiencies and penalties. They found intersectionality impacted how African American (and Asian) women are perceived as compared to White women and how these perceptions have a potential impact on leadership emergence and thus, career advancement. Specifically, the study showed Black women battle stereotypes of incompetence that hinders their obtaining leadership roles. However, once in leadership roles, stereotypes of Black women as dominant and strong operate to their benefit.

Beyond the intersection of race and gender, scholars have also explored intersections of other social constructs. For example, Gillborn (2015) examined the intersection of race and class in relation to parental experiences with the education system in the United Kingdom. Other researchers have explored the intersections of race, gender, and social class (Byrd, 2009; Brah & Phoenix, 2004), race, gender, and sexual orientation (Purdie-Vaughns & Eibach, 2008), education, income, race, and disability (Thorpe et al., 2013), and race and disability (Annamma et al., 2018).

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A growing body of work is beginning to investigate the intersection of disability, gender, and race. Ben-Moshe and Magana (2014) opened a dialogue about the impact of intersectionality of disability, gender, race and families of color. Miles (2019) explored the intersectionality of gender, race, and disability on homeownership and self-concept of African American women with disabilities. Marato et al. (2019) looked at the intersection of race, gender, disability, and education and how these multiple social categories led to greater economic insecurity in regards to total income and poverty levels. The impact of the intersection of gender, race, and disability on reproductive genetic technologies was the focus of research by Roberts and Jesudason (2013).

One study by Oberoi et al. (2015) specifically compared the treatment of African American and White women with disabilities in the receipt of vocational assistance. They found inequalities. The vocational agencies in the study spent less money on services for African American women with disabilities than their White counterparts with disabilities. They also found African American women had a lower chance of being employed after receiving services than their White colleagues.

Researchers using an intersectionality analysis to explore job mobility often include other social factors. For example, similar to some of the conclusions reached by Miles (2019) regarding homeownership, Oberoi et al. (2015) attributed some of the varied experiences of the disabled women in their study to differences in social economic status. Similarly, researchers have investigated the intersection of education (including obtaining a bachelor's degree), class, race, gender, and disability on career advancement (Marato, et al., 2019).

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This research, however, is limited to examining the intersecting effects of race, gender, and disability. This study controlled for social-economic status and education by including only college-educated African American women with disabilities in the study sample.

Outside the research discussed above, there are not a significant number of studies discussing, in particular, the intersectionality of gender, race, and disability. Erevelles and Minear (2010) lamented that many studies exploring the intersection of gender and race on social phenomena omit disability from the intersection-based analysis. These authors opined that the failure to include disability in the intersectional analysis may be an unconscious omission. Disability may also be excluded from intersectionality analysis because critical researchers view disability as a biological occurrence as opposed to a social construct (Erevelles & Minear, 2010). The lack of inclusion of disability in intersectionality research, whether through commission or omission, has given rise to two analytical frameworks that are informative for this study.

First, Annamma et al. (2013) developed a DisCrit analytical framework based on the recognition that neither critical race theory nor disability studies sufficiently address the intersection of ableism and racism to explain the experiences of people of color with disabilities. Second, Bailey and Mobley (2019) combined aspects of critical race theory, Black feminist thought, and disability studies to develop a Black feminist disability framework. This theoretical framework centers race, gender, and disability, challenging these generally siloed theories to work together to better understand the realities for those multiply marginalized within society.” (Bailey & Mobley, 2019, p. 20).

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While scholars have examined a number of social phenomena through an intersectional analysis of race and gender, they are beginning to integrate disability into their intersectional analysis. This study expands on scholarship examining the intersection of race, gender, and disability by investigating the specific relationship between the intersectionality of these three identities and career advancement through the lived experiences of college-educated African American women with physical disabilities.

### **Career Progression**

Often what supports and what impedes career advancement are two sides of the same coin. The existence of factors that support growth, for example mentoring relationships (Chandler, 2011), can be a barrier when there is a lack of opportunity to develop mentoring relationships (Johns, 2013). For minorities and women, one overarching contributor to career advancement is the willingness of leadership to embrace diversity and support of marginalized groups (Bebbington & Özbilgin, 2013). In addition, providing leadership development, a form of cultural capital, also supports career advancement (Lewis, 2016). Yet, even with the establishment of formal policies designed at creating equal opportunities, employers fail to focus on the social patterns that create career liabilities for minorities (Lewis, 2016; Labianca & Brass, 2006).

Career mobility results from the combination of two factors, individual effort and support of others (Wayne et al., 1999). Scholars have investigated the factors that contribute to career advancement for minorities and women that differ from those experienced by White males. A discussion of that research follows.

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### **Barriers for Career Advancement**

Scholars have relied on several theories to explain experiences minorities and women experience regarding career mobility. Included among those theories is leadership-member exchange theory. Leader-member exchange theory looks at the quality of the relationship between leaders and members (Park et al., 2017). Under this theory, leaders form relationships with subordinates. High quality exchanges drive the sharing of resources and support beyond the expected. The opposite is true of low-quality relationships that result in only the minimum necessary to maintain the relationship (Wayne et al., 1999).

Colella and Varma (2001) found that subordinates with disabilities form lower quality relationships with superiors than subordinates without disabilities. Similarly, Dwertmann and Boehm (2016) after investigating leader-member exchange dyads where supervisors had a disability, also found the dyad formed lower quality relationships.

One of the results of differentiation of leader-member relationships for workgroups is social comparisons among employees (Festinger, 1954). The intersection of leader-member exchange theory with the concept of social comparison leads to questions regarding how the perspectives of co-workers may impact a leader's efforts to support career development for co-workers who are different because of race, gender, and disability. This suggests leaders will seek to maintain their high quality relationships with non-disabled employees, possibly reinforcing the low quality relationships between leaders and disabled employees.

Other factors also impact career growth. For example, self-selecting to associate with similar persons, i.e., homophily (McPherson et al., 2001), coupled with being

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excluded by others because of perceived differences can affect career outcomes (Mollica, Gray, & Treviño, 2003). As well, social networks play a critical role in career development. Social ties can foster coaching, mentorship, sponsorship, counseling, and role modeling, all which can be beneficial to career growth (Chandler, Kram, & Yip, 2011). The direction of the influence of social networks, however, may not be the same for all employee groups (Gersick et al., 2000). Some of those differences related to race, gender, and disability are discussed later in this chapter.

### ***Gender***

The relationship between gender and leadership has been the focus of significant scholarly research (Rosette et al., 2016). Scholars have identified agentic characteristics of aggressiveness and dominance assigned to men and compassionate characteristics of emotional expressiveness associated with women as an explanation for the leadership gender gap (Badura et al., 2018).

Other explanations for career barriers for women include beliefs that men have greater managerial abilities than women (Schein, 1973), viewpoints that women are less suitable than men to lead (Netchaeva et al., 2015), and perceptions that self-confident women are less likable (Rudman, 1998). In addition, social networks have an impact on career advancement for women. For example, women medical doctors identified a lack of belonging as one of the several barriers to their pursuit of a career in academic surgery (Cochran et al., 2019).

Perceptions that men are inherently more competent than women result in lower evaluations and opportunities to demonstrate leadership potential for women (Seo et al., 2017). Attribution of women's performance to luck as opposed to ability may also limit

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career opportunities (Seo et al., 2017). On the other hand, women may also create their own barriers through self-stereotyping by viewing themselves different from those in senior management (van Vianen & Fischer, 2002).

The combination of societal (bias), business structural (failure to recruit), and career pipeline (lack of mentors and access to social networks) barriers create a glass ceiling that impedes women's ability to advance in their careers (Johns, 2013; Bains & Cummings, 2000). The glass ceiling effect refers not simply to impediments to career advancement but to increased barriers at the higher levels of organizations (Cotter et al., 2001). For African American women, the ceiling may be made of concrete (Byrd, 2009) as covert discrimination, microaggressions, and struggles against negative stereotypes are added to make career progression even more difficult.

### *Race*

Minorities, and African Americans in particular, experience impediments to career growth based on the race (Barrett et al., 2004). Outside of discrimination (Sagas & Cunningham, 2005), African Americans face reduced chances of career growth sometimes based solely on the similarity preference of decision makers (Kulkarni, 2012). African Americans experience career barriers based on perceptions that they have garnered positions based on factors other than skill (Madsen & Mabokela, 2002). Also, African Americans have identified the struggle of visibility and contrast (Kanter, 1977), tokenism (Lewis, 2016), and expectations for assimilation (Brown et al., 2018; Dickens & Chavez, 2018) as stumbling blocks in career advancement.

An additional barrier to career advancement is African Americans often have less social capital than their White counterparts (Parks-Yancy, 2006). Social capital refers to

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the relationships persons build among social groups that support the exchange of resources (information, mentoring, and opportunities) among the social group members (Seibert et al., 2001). The negative impact of social capital can be experienced either as a deficit of capital or a deficit on the return on capital (McDonald & Day, 2010).

Researchers have found for African Americans the lack of social capital/social networks can be a factor in reduced career opportunities (Parks-Yancy, 2006; Ibarra, 1995).

### *Disability*

Researchers have explored aspects of the relationship between disability and career development. Stone and Colella (1996) identified a range of societal, organizational, and cultural factors and employee and co-worker attributes to explain the treatment of persons with disabilities. Specifically, they found that persons with disabilities are more successful in developing high leader-member exchange relationships when they engage in upward engagement activities such as ingratiation (e.g., other enhancement, opinion conformity, rendering favors, and self-presentation) (Stone & Colella, 1996). Lindstrom et al. (2011) investigated long-term employment opportunities for young adults with disabilities and found postsecondary education or training, stabilized employment, and self-motivating attributes, including persistence, support career progression for this population. Persistence also was a significant factor in Noonan et al.'s (2004) findings regarding the challenges to career progression faced by high achieving women with disabilities. These authors credited what they denominate a "dynamic self" (interconnected identity constructs, belief in self, and personality characteristics) as a significant contributor to career advancement for women with

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disabilities through leveraging supports like family encouragement and mitigating barriers such as ableism.

On the other hand, Wilson-Kovacs et al. (2008) identified self-limiting behaviors such as failure to apply for jobs for which they are qualified as a barrier to career development for individuals with disabilities. Similarly, Emira et al. (2018) linked self-reluctance and low aspiration to personal barriers disabled persons experience in attaining leadership positions in higher education.

Another impediment for career growth is failure to establish relationships with people of disabilities. Kulkarni (2012) suggested that persons with disabilities may not have social networks that support career advancement. Many non-disabled persons have negative biases against and are uncomfortable around people with disabilities. Stone and Colella (1996) asserted that because people may fail to associate with people with disabilities, relationships do not form. The lack of these critical relationships can have a negative bearing in organizations where these relationships support the organization's social structure (Stone & Colella, 1996).

Additional obstructions to career mobility for people with disabilities include discrimination (Oberoi et al., 2015), relegation to positions with little to no promotion potential, low quality job assignments, and scarce opportunities for training (Schur et al., 2005). Impediments to career growth may stem from employers who believe that persons with disabilities are less capable of performing work-related tasks than their able-bodied co-workers (Bonaccio et al., 2020).

Scholarship exploring the career experiences of persons with disabilities reflects many of the same barriers and aids to advancement as those experienced by African

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Americans and women. For example, similar to African Americans and women, the lack of mentors or coaches also hampers career mobility for people with disabilities (Emira et al., 2018). Moreover, “the experience of being denied the opportunity to play the social roles expected of one's nondisabled age-peers” also create barriers for people with disabilities (Asch, 2001, p. 395). Taken together, these structural, organizational, and individual-level barriers create obstacles to career advancement for people with disabilities.

### **Summary**

Notwithstanding the rise of disability studies, critical race theory, and feminist theory in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, significant opportunities exist for researchers to probe further the relationship between disability, gender, and race. A greater understanding of co-workers who are African American women with disabilities may reduce stigmatization, which leads to decreased career advancement opportunities for these workers. Moreover, it is important for organizations of all types to understand the potential hurdles the intersection of these three factors can raise to the career advancement of this subset of employees.

This study sought to demonstrate African American women with disabilities are not a triple threat to an organization's productivity. Instead, their race, gender, and disability status bring a richness of diversity that can be beneficial. African American women (and other ethnic minorities) with disabilities can be a triple asset as opposed to a triple liability some may consider them to be.

**CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY**

This study uses qualitative research methods, specifically an interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA) approach, to explore how African American women with physical disabilities make sense of how the intersections of race, gender, and disability have affected their career journeys. This research identified the supports received and the obstacles faced by persons in this demographic. Understanding these women's lived experiences can provide useful information for other African American women with physical disabilities working to achieve their career goals. The data can also help educate employers in hiring, training, and promoting African American women with physical disabilities.

This chapter discusses the research questions, participant information, sampling plans, and data collection methods for this study. Further, the chapter includes a discussion of data analysis, methodological integrity, and ethical considerations.

**Research Questions**

1. How do college-educated African American women with disabilities make sense of how race, gender, and disability intersect in their lived experiences to affect career progression?
2. How does the intersection of race, gender, and disability affect the supports or barriers African American women with physical disabilities receive or encounter as they navigate their careers?

**Method**

This study used a qualitative approach. A qualitative approach seeks to understand societal-based phenomena (Babbie, 2017) through words instead of numbers

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(Maykut & Morehouse, 1994). Qualitative research can draw conclusions about a common phenomenon by examining the individual experiences of study participants (Ayres et al., 2016).

Qualitative research can be grounded in different theoretical frameworks or worldviews. One of those frameworks is a transformative worldview (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A transformative worldview considers the experiences of diverse and traditionally marginalized groups (Mertens, 2010). This study explored the experiences of persons who are members of traditionally marginalized groups, including those with experiences with inequality and alienation (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

### **Research Design Overview**

This qualitative study used a phenomenological design to explore participants' lived experiences (Groenewald, 2004). A phenomenological approach can shed new light on a sociological reality through the experiences of particular persons (Starks & Trinidad, 2016). This study employed an IPA approach (Miller et al., 2018) to discover and interpret the experiences of African American women with physical disabilities in advancing their careers. Miller et al. (2018) explained an IPA approach is flexible and “bolsters the expansion of phenomena and prioritizes (a) diversity attached to lived experience, (b) freedom to explore context, and (c) relationship to life narratives” (Miller et al., 2018, p. 240). This branch of phenomenological analysis examines data (for example, interview transcripts) and discovers meaningful themes from that data. These themes help explain how study participants make sense of their life experiences (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014).

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The study examined the shared experiences and multiple perspectives of college-educated African American women with physical disabilities as they sought to advance their respective careers. The research focused on the effect of intersectionality on career growth for this demographic. The study also investigated what barriers, if any, they have encountered and what kind of help they have had, such as mentors, to achieve their career goals. These topics were investigated through open-ended questions qualitative research and IPA approach use, thereby allowing study participants to share freely and even expound on questions not asked but relevant to the research question.

### **Participants**

The study population was college-educated African-American women with physical disabilities over the age of 25. The research sought to explore the experiences of physically disabled African American women in all stages of their careers. Part of the study investigated whether any of the three intersecting elements of race, gender, and disability play a more prominent role in career development based on career stages. For example, would study participants approaching the end of their careers identify race as a more significant factor in their career advancement while those in the earlier parts of their career identify disability as the more prominent influence?

The sampling area was limited to the Washington, DC, metropolitan area. Some researchers suggest possible sample size ranges suitable for particular types of studies (Sims et al., 2018), although researchers have not identified an exact sample size needed for phenomenological studies (Vasileiou et al., 2018). Also, while some scholars assert an appropriate sample size is one that meets saturation (Saunders et al., 2017), other scholars argue that saturation is not a goal for phenomenological studies in general (van Manen et

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al., 2016) and IPA studies in particular (Hale et al., 2008). My goal was to work with a sample size sufficient to gather in depth and rich information about this particular population (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014).

I used purposive sampling to identify persons who are college-educated African American females with physical disabilities (Etikan et al., 2016). To obtain participants for the study, I employed a multi-pronged recruitment plan. First, I sent solicitation letters to groups comprised of college-educated African American women (Appendix A). These groups included graduate chapters of the sororities in the National Pan-Hellenic Council and social/community organizations such as Jack and Jill of America. Further, I solicited professional organizations catering to African American women such as the Washington Association of Black Journalists and the National Black Nurses Association. I also solicited organizations and individuals who provide services to persons with disabilities including the District of Columbia Department of Disability Services.

Given the nature of the study, snowball sampling (Noy, 2008) yielded several participants. Additionally, I invited women currently known to me who met all three demographics to participate. Ultimately, eight women participated and provided data that helped answer the research questions underlying the study.

### **Data Collection**

The primary data collection methods for a phenomenological study are interviews (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Observations captured through field notes are also a data collection vehicle for phenomenological studies (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). In addition, phenomenological-based research can also review documentation of study subjects' lived experiences as a part of data collection efforts (Slakoff & Brennan, 2017).

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### *Data Collection Procedures*

The solicitation letters included information regarding how I might contact those who would agree to participate in the study. After identifying potential study participants, I provided these potential respondents a pre-screen questionnaire to ensure they all met the eligibility requirements of the study – college-educated, African American women, 25 years or older with a physical disability. All potential study participants who met the study's eligibility requirements were sent a Participant Letter (Appendix B) that provided more detailed information regarding their participation in the study.

For qualitative studies, interviews can take many forms, including unstructured, semi-structured, and structured. For phenomenological studies, semi-structured interviews reflect a better practice (Peoples, 2020). Pastor et al. (2018) recognized several benefits to using semi-structured interviews, including allowing the interviewee's experiences to be shared while also permitting the researcher to make observations and interpret social contexts.

This study employed a semi-structured approach to the interviews. Appendix C. The open-ended questions allowed the interviewees to share their experiences without restrictions. This mode of interviewing enabled the participants' voices to be the primary conversation driver (Windsong, 2018). This approach also created opportunities to explore new areas when the interviewees gave answers beyond the four corners of the questions asked. The semi-structured format further provided openings to ask follow-up questions, resulting in additional, informative data (Babbie, 2017).

The interview questions covered broad topics such as

- a general discussion of the career paths of each participant,

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- challenges faced in their careers,
- investigation of whether race, gender, or disability separately or intersectionally impacted career growth,
- exploration of what participants have done to increase opportunities for career advancement,
- factors that have been most helpful in advancing their careers, and
- the role of mentors, including whether participants had a mentor and what role those mentors (or the lack of mentors) played in career development

Conducting face-to-face interviews on Zoom provided the opportunity to make visual contact with interviewees. This format appeared to enhance the comfort level of the study participants because they were able to see the interviewer as opposed to talking with an unconnected voice on a telephone call. The electronic platform also produced audio and visual recordings of interview sessions that made it possible to revisit interviews to resolve ambiguities in the data, thereby increasing data analysis accuracy. Recording interviews also allowed me to concentrate on the answers participants gave during the interview and created a visual record for me to examine to capture observations as guided by an Observation Protocol (Appendix D).

Further, I engaged a professional transcribing service to transcribe the interviews. I compared these transcriptions against the recorded interviews for additional data accuracy. As a member checking practice, I sent the transcripts to the study participants so that they could review the transcripts and make any changes they believed more accurately reflected their statements and lived experiences.

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I returned to the audio and video recordings to take field notes that helped capture data beyond the spoken words of the participants. Through these observations, I was able to capture in my field notes the emphasis participants placed on certain words and emotional cues (for example, happiness, confidence, anger) that gave further insight into the participants' life experiences.

In addition to interviews and observations, I reviewed documentation that reflected some of the study participants' lived experiences. This documentation included participant's websites and LinkedIn profiles. Some participants also utilized social media to share information about their experiences, in particular interviews and webinars. I reviewed these media formats as their content added further information about the lived experiences of these particular African American women with physical disabilities.

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis for the study was primarily based on an IPA approach. This approach was mostly used in analyzing data derived from interviews and field notes based on researcher observations. The development of themes or patterns that is part of the IPA approach was also used to analyze archival data.

An IPA approach initially focuses on each study participant as a singular case (Smith et al., 2009). With that lens, the IPA methodology includes four steps: 1) reading and re-reading original data, e.g., transcripts; 2) initial coding; 3) development of emergent themes; and 4) exploring connections across emergent themes. Once these steps are complete, the analysis moves to the next study participant case and repeats the first four steps for each case. The final stage of the IPA method is to search for patterns across cases (Smith et al., 2009).

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My data analysis followed the IPA model and began with reading and re-reading transcripts from each participant interview. This initial reading was designed to identify any mistakes in transcription and also to gain my first view into the participant's life experiences as expressed during the interview. With my re-read of the transcripts I journeyed into the second step of the process, i.e., initial coding. I used the comment function in Word to make margin notes on the transcript. I then re-read the transcripts again and transferred my margin notes to an Excel spreadsheet. During this stage of coding, I used a version of Smith et al.'s (2009) exploratory commenting process and captured comments in three categories – descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual.

From this exploratory commenting exercise for my first three interviews, I began to form some preliminary code categories or emergent themes. I used these preliminary codes as the initial code list I created in MAXQDA. For the remaining interviews, I used the code list I built in MAXQDA to create the initial codes for those interviews. In addition, where themes emerged in subsequent interviews, I added to my code list and reviewed all interviews and recoded as necessary. This fine-tuning is consistent with Saldaña's (2016) view that additional recoding helps refine categories and codes.

In keeping with the IPA focus on each individual case, I began to search for connections between emergent themes for each study participant. I used MAXQDA to develop summary tables for each interviewee where I identified super-ordinate and subthemes. This identification was achieved through applying tools suggested by Smith, et al. (2009) including abstraction, polarization, contextualization, and numeration.

The individual summary tables aided me in searching for patterns between cases, the final step in IPA analysis. Several functions in MAXQDA also helped me visually

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depict how codes overlap and what codes were outliers, thus assisting in generating themes and patterns across the cases. Summary tables reflecting the themes that emerged from analyzing the data are found in Appendix E.

The codes generated through the process of analyzing participant interviews were also used to evaluate data obtained through observations and review of archival information. In addition to the linguistic commenting process under IPA, I also used affective methods coding (Saldana, 2016) to analyze my field notes to create or confirm themes identified through coding of participant transcripts.

### ***Methodological Integrity***

Methodological integrity for qualitative studies requires a demonstration of adequacy, groundedness in evidence, meaningfulness, context, coherence, and consistency (American Psychological Association, 2020). Accuracy is also a measure of integrity (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). To support this study's methodological integrity, I employed member checking, triangulation of interview data with documentary evidence, and independent transcription of interviews. In the discussion of my findings in Chapter Four, I also discuss my biases, including revealing I am a member of the population that is the subject of the study. Finally, I have used rich, thick descriptions in my findings, including direct quotes from study participants.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Ethical considerations, some unique to a qualitative approach, arise in scholarly research. I addressed ethical concerns in several ways. First, before recruiting research participants, I sought and received IRB approval to conduct the research (Appendix F). Second, study participants were sent a Participant Letter that met Creighton University's

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Social-Behavioral Research Informed Consent Template requirements (Appendix B).

This included informing the participants their participation was voluntary and the participants right to withdraw from the study without any type of penalty. Third, solicitation letters requesting participation identified the purposes of the research and sought permission to approach potential participants who were identified through the solicitation request (Appendix A). Fourth, to protect confidentiality and preserve the research subjects' anonymity, I assigned pseudonyms to each study participant.

Documents linking the transcripts, pseudonyms, and related coding were maintained on a USB drive and researcher computer, both password-protected. The researcher has sole access to these password-protected files. Fifth, to support methodological integrity and as an ethics tool, I used member checking by providing study participants an opportunity to review their transcripts for accuracy and completeness before finalizing the study.

One additional ethical check is my discussion of researcher bias with the study participants and as part of this dissertation in practice. In IPA the researcher may bring her own biases to the interpretative process (Brocki & Wearden, 2006). To guard against researcher bias in this type of study, during the interviews with study participants, I revealed I am a member of the studied demographic – an African American woman with a physical disability.

### **Summary**

Phenomenological research design allows researchers to delve into a particular phenomenon's essence through the study participants' lived experiences. This chapter discussed why a phenomenological approach was applied to address the real-world problem of how African American women with physical disabilities pilot their career

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journeys. The chapter discussed data collection methods, including identifying an appropriate population, the sampling plan for obtaining a sufficient number of research participants, and the means of gathering data (interviews, observations, and documentary artifacts). Data analysis techniques and processes to address methodological integrity and ethical considerations complete the chapter's discussion of the methodological elements. The qualitative approach of the study, grounded in a transformative framework, aligned with the study's aim to discover useful strategies African American women with physical disabilities can use to advance their careers.

**CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

The purpose of this study was to explore the intersectionality of gender, race, and disability on career progression for college-educated African American women with physical disabilities who live in Washington, DC and the surrounding metropolitan area.

The study investigated two research questions:

3. How do college-educated African American women with physical disabilities make sense of how race, gender, and disability intersect in their lived experiences to affect career progression?
4. How does the intersection of race, gender, and disability affect the supports or barriers African American women with physical disabilities receive or encounter as they navigate their careers?

The primary data source for the study was semi-structured interviews with eight college-educated African American women with physical disabilities. In addition to the interviews, the researcher created field notes from observations from the interviews and reviewed archival information about study participants, where available.

Findings from the study begin with a description of the sample, including demographic information about each study participant. Each participant provided information that helped bring context to the lived experiences they shared in their interviews. Thus, consistent with the IPA methodology, the findings include a summary regarding each participant and the common and the unique themes that emerged from their discussions of their life experiences.

The findings continue with a discussion of the thematic patterns that surfaced across the sample from the data. These superordinate themes were: 1) the intersection of

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social identities effect on career advancement; 2) the effect of disability on career advancement; 3) tools used to navigate careers; and 4) the intersection of social identities effect on career supports and barriers. Each superordinate theme included nested or subthemes that are also discussed in the chapter.

### **Description of the Sample**

The sample included eight African American women with physical disabilities. While many of the participants were originally from different parts of the country, most spent the majority of their careers in the Washington, DC metropolitan area. The age range of the sample was 41-69. Most participants were in the middle stage of their careers. However, two were retired, with a third contemplating retirement in the near future.

Each participant held a bachelor's degree, with five holdings master's degrees and two doctorate degrees. The participants enjoyed careers in the private, public, and non-profit sectors. They also worked in a variety of fields – nursing, publishing, sports entertainment, teaching, disability services, human resources. One participant was a small business owner and one had recently become a blogger. Table 1 provides further general information regarding each participant.

While each participant was of the same race and gender, their disabilities differed. Some had visible disabilities – muscle dystrophy, cerebral palsy, amputee, and Ramsey Hunt Syndrome, while others had imperceptible disabilities – multiple sclerosis, epilepsy, and deafness. Another variable that impacted their life's experiences was the point in their lives when their disability began. Some participants were born with their disabilities,

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others saw the onset of their disability before their career began while others first experienced their disability during various phases of their careers.

**Table 1***Participant Demographic Information*

| Name   | Age | Undergraduate Degree            | Graduate Degree(s)                            | Industry          | Current Position     | Disability                        | Disability Onset |
|--------|-----|---------------------------------|---|-------------------|----------------------|-----------------------------------|------------------|
| Gamila | 48  | Advertising                     | Exercise and sports science and management    | Sports            | Vice President       | Ramsey Hunt Syndrome              | During career    |
| Bisa   | 62  | Telecommunications and music    | Communication Arts                            | Education         | Senior writer/editor | Multiple Sclerosis                | During career    |
| Kala   | 44  |                                 | Health Communications                         | Government        | Commission Chair     | Multiple Sclerosis                | Pre-career       |
| Dahlia | 60  | Physics and Clinical psychology |   | Business Services | President            | Deaf                              | Birth            |
| Ayanna | 41  | Psychology and Human Relations  | Early Childhood Education                     | Education         | Blogger              | Cerebral Palsy                    | Birth            |
| Ledesi | 69  | Nursing                         | Health Administration                         | Non-profit        | Retired              | Epilepsy resulting in memory loss | During career    |
| Tania  | 44  | Communications                  | N/A   | Non-profit        | Staff                | Muscular Dystrophy                | Birth            |
| Willia | 64  | Education                       | Adult Education and Rehabilitation Counseling | Government        | Retired              | Amputee                           | Pre-career       |

**Case-by-Case Phenomenological Interview Summaries*****Ms. Gamila***

Ms. Gamila is 48 years old and currently holds the title of Vice President in her company. She has spent her entire career in the sports and entertainment industry. Her

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initial exposure to the industry began while she was an undergraduate student. She readily admitted that her pursuit of additional education stemmed from her unreadiness to leave the collegiate environment. Ms. Gamila's career was shaped by many factors including relationships and networking, her willingness to go where opportunities arose, and her resiliency. She shared that her first professional job came as a result of two of these factors, networking and willingness to pursue opportunities:

At the conclusion of my assistantship, where my boss at the time reached out, made a phone call, got me an interview at another Division 1 college university that had pretty much completed their hiring process, but he called up a friend and that's how I got an interview. And then I got my first job working at [xxx], moved to [xxx], didn't know anyone.

....

And so what I learned early on, is the power of networking and the power of basically just getting a door opened and I could do the rest, meaning my experience.

Ms. Gamila stated on several occasions that her industry is male-dominated and how that fact affected her career navigation. For example, she identified the inability "to go" where her male colleagues could go and how she addressed that obstacle:

And so, I think that I learned early on to be very resilient, to keep pushing for those opportunities or looking for different ways to advance my career, because I didn't have ... And you don't have the same opportunities as a man who can walk into a locker room. And I worked for an NBA franchise for four years and was in a mid-level to rising senior position. And I saw very early on that there were

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things that my colleagues could do that I simply couldn't do. So, I had to find a work around to still keep advancing.

She also discussed that the male dominance in her profession made it difficult for her to identify women mentors. As a result, all of her mentors were men.

Ms. Gamila's disability is Ramsay Hunt Syndrome that affects the face and hearing. Ms. Gamila experienced the onset of her disability after her professional career began. She noted that prior to her disability she did not associate how much of your self-worth is tied to attractiveness.

And it's funny because I say that, and I wouldn't even say I was a vain person. I thought I was attractive enough. I'm not saying I thought I was the best looking person. But when you have a physical disability like I had, like one day I'm okay and the next day I wake up and the entire side of my face is drooping and malformed.

The physical manifestations of Ms. Gamila's disability have lessened overtime. However, the Covid-19 event has increased the impact of her disability on her work. She constantly is concerned how her face is being portrayed in electronic-based meetings like Zoom.

And so, I'm still extremely self-conscious because now everybody wants to be on video. And I live for those days, "Can we just do a phone call? Can we do a Zoom and turn my camera off?" Because again, it just has made me a lot more self-aware of, again, how it's tied into how you look. How do you look to others? During the pandemic, I've had to do countless numbers of virtual conferences. And I can speak on my profession all day long, but my eyes closed, but the

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conferences stressed me out, not because of what I'm being asked to talk about, because I know I'm going to have to sit there on video for 60 minutes. And I don't know if I have not gotten enough sleep and what my face is going to look like. And then it's on tape forever. And how does it look to other people? So, I would say that's still something that I deal with a lot.

Notwithstanding the challenges the Covid 19 has brought to how she does her job, Ms. Gamila is contemplating her next career move and winning recognition among her peers for outstanding work in her field.

***Mrs. Bisa***

Mrs. Bisa began her career during the recessionary period of the early 1980s. She worked several jobs including in a position where she was the only female within the state at that position. Early in her career she applied for jobs that were awarded to persons of a different race who were less qualified than her. That experience spurred her to move to Washington, DC to attend graduate school at a historically Black college. Ms. Bisa stated:

I always knew I was going to go to grad school, but that hastened that decision and the decision to go to an HBCU, which was an experience I had not had in undergrad. So, I just wanted a different experience. I wanted to be someplace where I knew, or I believe that there would be more opportunities for me regardless of what I decided to do, and I found that to be true.

Ms. Bisa is a senior writer/editor and has worked for her current company, in several positions, for over thirty years. Less than one year after starting with the company, she had her first exacerbation of her disability, multiple sclerosis. As she was

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recovering from that episode, her job accommodated her with an assignment that was conducive to her recovery. However, with subsequent exacerbations, she was denied a request to work from home. In addition, her then supervisor restricted her ability to travel, an accommodation that Mrs. Bisa did not request.

[M]y boss decided I should no longer travel ever. And I had to let him know that that wasn't necessary. I didn't ask for that accommodation and that wasn't necessary that I would know, by that time I was walking again, I could walk again, and whether I was walking normally or using a cane or whatever the situation was, I should not have been prevented from traveling because of the MS.

For Mrs. Bisa, her disability was more salient in impacting her career post-graduate school than her race or gender. She has taken her experiences with seeking accommodations to help others navigate difficult bosses and the system for obtaining accommodations. Indeed, Mrs. Bisa helped organize a union at her job and served as president for five years. She also shared that the Covid 19 event has taught her company that teleworking is a viable work model.

So, working from home as everyone now sees, does not mean that you are not working. Does not at all mean that you are not working. . . But the need to work from home should not preclude anyone from doing their job. If that is a necessary accommodation, it should be looked at as such, and it should not be denied.

### ***Mrs. Kala***

Mrs. Kala is a 44-year-old, mid-level professional who works in a government agency that supports persons with disabilities. She was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis as a teenager. Mrs. Kala has held several jobs in her career, with each move of position

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constituting a job promotion. She indicated that she felt it was difficult to get promoted in the same employer because the promotion process is based on a system that favors longevity, a preference that works against women.

The system is built for longevity, not necessarily talent or creativity, it's built for longevity. The longer you're there, the more likely you are to become promoted and as a woman, and this is where the female factor comes into play, we really don't have the opportunity if you choose to take time out to have a family. If you choose to take time out to go on maternity leave, that automatically kicks you down by a minimum of three months. That takes time away from you. That does not give you the opportunity to build that longevity that your counterpart may or may not be able to do as well.

When asked how her race, gender, or disability intersected in ways to impact her career, Mrs. Kala related experiences in her work life where her social identities individually played a role. For example, she recounted that because of her gender she was asked to do certain tasks like getting coffee. She recalled one particular instance where someone said to her "I think you would do so much better if you just wore a skirt."

Her disability was also an implied topic she encountered as she sought to make a career move. She described how one potential employer suggested in an interview that her disability would cause her to be sick often.

There was an incident where during one of the committee interviews that I was going on, this was after Capitol Hill, I was transitioning back to higher education, where there was some concern brought up whether or not I would get sick a lot and how would that manage or be managed within the workplace and how would

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I manage or presume to help to keep up with that. It wasn't a direct question about my disability, more of a question about whether or not my disability would impede upon their productivity and my ability to do the job. . . That was an uncomfortable situation for me.

As a result, she no longer shared her disability during interviews. As she explained,

With regards to my disability, at that point I had taken on the profile of telling people I was living with multiple sclerosis after I got in the position because once I'm there, you're going to fall in love with me and you're not going to lose me in that job so it was a safer place for me to be.”

Mrs. Kala also enumerated several instances where she felt her race was salient identity related to her career. She lamented how she was asked to opine on matters outside of her expertise solely based on her being a Black person – “with regards to my race, it did become a situation where I was the go-to person for the issues of the black community, even if they weren't in my lane.” In addition, she shared,

When that's the first thing you see about a person that does present that unique challenge of having to see beyond that. Yes, I'm a black woman but I also love comic books. I enjoy anime. I can talk to you about any type of culture and then we can go for it and have an amazing conversation about Shakespeare. How do we have to break down that piece so the first thing he sees is black, it presents that unique challenge.

Similar to her race, Mrs. Kala indicated that she is also considered an “it girl” regarding disability matters. She reflected on an experience at a conference where she earned the designation the “ADA chick.”

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There was one conference I went to at [xxx] University and I'll never forget, I think this was the first time that somebody had stood up and said, 'I hear us talking about all of these issues but nobody has once said the Americans with Disabilities Act. We're talking around it, we don't want to use the word disability.' And for the whole rest of the conference, I was known as the ADA chick.

However, while she believed that in regard to race, being an "it girl" is limiter, she was less bothered by that designation regarding disability.

Then with regards to my disability, I definitely became the it-girl and I actually don't mind that as much. . . . So sometimes I don't mind that as much but definitely when it comes to my race or gender, it seems to be I get put in a box because that's the first thing people immediately see.

Like some of the other study participants, Mrs. Kala extolled the benefits of having mentors, both professional and peer, to career advancement. She also spoke of several other career supports including the critical value of networking, taking on speaking engagements, and writing position papers. She also touted serving on advisory boards as a career builder. In identifying this support, she noted service on advisory boards at the community and corporate level. When asked whether she thought race, gender, or disability impeded the ability of serving on these boards she responded,

Yes, it's unfortunate but there are a lot of stereotypes when it comes to being African- American because of being black and because of being female, to being a person of color, to being a person with a disability and you just have to constantly have those conversations and beat back those stereotypes and beat back those microaggressions and make sure that you know where that is.

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***Dr. Dahlia***

Dr. Dahlia was the only study participant whose income is solely derived from the business she owns. Dr. Dahlia is 60 years old and is the president of a firm that provides business services. She began her career in the government with the hopes of becoming an astronaut. However, her deafness became an unsurmountable barrier to that career goal. She related that was discouraged from studying aeronautical science “because how do I, as a black deaf woman, go up in space? They may be able to get you there, but how would you understand how to get back down.” The agency did not have the tools to communicate with her or include her in research projects. As a result, she

Sat in a corner way in the back, back way in the back, disconnected from everyone. . . And so, after a short period of time, I decided I didn't want that. I didn't like how I felt about me. So, I decided that I could still enjoy the stars and the moon. Disappointed that I wasn't encouraged or empowered to move forward, to become an astronaut that I decided to pursue more people-oriented concepts.

Dr. Dahlia double majored in physics and clinical psychology. After leaving the government, she utilized her education in clinical psychology in her work at several jobs, including one where she was able to create her own position description. However, in those positions she was still the only African American and persons were intimidated by her. She proclaimed,

There was nobody else in the company like me, but in many instances, [I] intimidated people who did not look like me, and they made attempts to try to say things or do things to take me down a notch or two, but they forgot that I can lip-read. So, I already knew the game. So, I already knew the types of conversations

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that were going to be had before they were had because I could lip-read. I understood what was going to happen before I entered the room. So that was a plus and advantage for me.

Dr. Dahlia also believed that African Americans were not receiving the full share of clinical services that her then employer provided so she became an advocate for patrons to receive full clinical services. Her advocacy was not well received.

And so, people that didn't look like us or else they looked like me did not appreciate this. So, who is this deaf woman that's coming in with all this energy, that's advocating, telling us that we need to be more inclusive and that we need to cater our services to fit all people, too much power for that deaf woman to have? An incident at her job convinced her it was time to start her own company. She believed that if she wanted things to change, she needed to be a change agent.

I decided that if I wanted to be the agent of change, smaller, big ways, however, the Lord would lead that I couldn't do it in the limitations of what people thought I should be. I had to learn to create it on my own. And that's kind of what I've done.

Dr. Dahlia believed that technology was a significant factor in helping her achieve her career goals because it facilitated communication with both the deaf and hearing communities. Technology also helped her develop proposals and communicate those in ways in which others did not know of her deafness until they met her in person. As she stated, "I think technology helped quite a bit because then if you already agree about my services, then by the time I get there and you see me, it's not even an issue because you've already seen my CV."

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Similar to another participant in the study (Mrs. Kala), Dr. Dahlia learned not to make her disability known while soliciting clients. She experienced denial of work because potential clients assumed they would not be able to communicate with her as opposed to assessing whether she could produce the services requested. So, while she might identify her company as woman-owned, she did not offer that her company was owned by a person with a disability.

***Ms. Ayanna***

Ms. Ayanna is a former elementary school teacher. In recent years, she left the classroom and is now a blogger who addresses disability and mental health. Ms. Ayanna was born with cerebral palsy that affects her walking. She also suffers with an eating disorder and additional mental health concerns.

Ms. Ayanna's teaching career focused on students in the lower grades. While she obtained the necessary certifications for her position, she was not interested in going into administration as part of a plan of advancing her career. She was content to work with students.

I think I didn't really see doing anything but classroom stuff, because that's what I loved. I just loved being around the kids. I thought about occasionally dipping into higher academia, but no, I don't want to tell people how to write papers.

That's not ... I like the little people. So that's where I wanted to stay.

Ms. Ayanna was hired into the school system with a known disability. She noted however, that she was not aware of other disabled persons being hired as teachers.

Because one thing I've noticed being an educator, that there aren't many of us who are disabled in the education field. I can say during those 10 years I never ... I met

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people who had disabilities but they weren't ... It maybe was something that came within the time that they've been teachers, but they didn't have disability needs when they first started. But I never met someone like myself who is coming into the classroom as a person with a disability and having to advocate for the things that she would need to be a successful educator.

For some period of her career, her disability was not a hinderance to her advancement. She served in some schools that focused on children with special needs. Given their population, those schools were accessible and included accommodations that benefited Ms. Ayanna and the students. However, there came a time when she moved to schools that were less accommodating. For example, Ms. Ayanna was assigned to a classroom on the third floor of a non-elevator building. Having to manipulate steps to get to her classroom and to escort her students to areas of the school that were not also on the floor with her classroom took a physical toll on her.

One school that I was at my classroom was on the third floor and that wasn't much of a problem. But it became a problem for me when all of the specials that my children had were down in the basement, so that's another set of stairs to go up, three more sets of stairs to go down, to go get them, take them and bring them back another three sets to go up. I'm not saying that became a problem but eventually it was hard.

Ms. Ayanna credited a number of factors as supports to her career. For example, she assisted her career advancement by taking on extra work including working as an after-school coordinator and as a tutor. She also increased career opportunities by being a helper to others who needed extra support. She identified having a life outside of school

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and staying connected with friends, including occasional vacations, as being beneficial to career. Like some of the other participants, she found support in her faith in God.

One support Ms. Ayanna did not identify was having a mentor. Indeed, in response to a question regarding mentors or job coaches she indicated that she was not aware that a mentor-mentee relationship was an option for her. She reflected “if I knew that that was an option, I probably would have taken it. But it was never something that was presented to me, so I wasn't aware that it was an option.”

Ms. Ayanna at some point recognized the need for her to seek out mental health professionals. As a result of her appointments, she was no longer able to take on the extra work related to coordination of after school programs. This proved problematic for her new principal who demanded she participate in after-school activities notwithstanding her medical appointments. Even though she had received excellent performance ratings in the past and had been named a Teacher of the Year, Ms. Ayanna lost her teaching position because her principal gave her negative evaluations for failure to perform after-school duties.

***Mrs. Ledesi***

Mrs. Ledesi is a former nurse who retired on disability. Her disability, epilepsy, presented late in her career and caused her to lose her job. Mrs. Ledesi described her path to becoming a nurse as accidental. Her desire was to become a librarian, but she wanted to work in the health field. She pursued a nursing degree because that was “the closest thing to getting into the hospital.”

Mrs. Ledesi worked at the same predominantly African American hospital for all of her career. Like, Ms. Ayanna, Mrs. Ledesi was comfortable serving in her role at the

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staff level. Although she was a charge nurse at the time of her retirement, she did not actively seek out career advancement. Like the career itself, she stumbled into her position as charge nurse. Moreover, she did not seek advancement in hospital administration or other positions for which she was qualified because of her nursing degrees. She explained,

I was really satisfied in my job and I was tired when I got off of work. I didn't really want to do anything else. . . . I had no desire to go anyplace else at the time, but that was something else. I didn't know of all the opportunities that were out there, that I could have done my nursing career and worked at a government office. A lot of nurses work in government offices and do planning and do a lot of different things that I didn't really know about, that there were all these other options other than doing the hands-on care. But I didn't mind doing the hands-on care. . . . I mean, I loved it while I was doing it, but it was a lot. But I never thought of going somewhere else. I was never offered somewhere else to go and I never thought of it on my own.

Mrs. Ledesi was happy in her job and working towards retirement when her disability began to directly affect her ability to do her work. As she confessed, "I honestly have to say that my years there were good years. I didn't have a problem there at all until I did have a problem." Because her disability affected her memory, she recognized that she could be a danger to patients. She recounted,

But I knew that I wasn't the person I used to be and I was the person in charge, and so I kind of knew I needed to get out before I hurt somebody unintentionally.

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I mean, when you go home and you got medicine in your pockets, some were narcotics, something's not right.

Recognizing that she needed to remove herself from direct patient care, Mrs. Ledesi sought an accommodation to work as a nursing assistant, doing jobs that others would not want to do. However, she wanted to keep the salary she earned as a nurse. When her employer denied that accommodation, she retired on disability as she concluded she might as well stay home since her income would be about the same.

### *Ms. Tania*

Ms. Tania is 44 years old and works in a non-profit that provides services to people with disabilities. She is also a writer and has published several books. Ms. Tania operates from a wheelchair as a result of muscular dystrophy. Ms. Tania shared how her disability not only impacted her career but the preparation for her career. She explained that it took her twelve years to obtain her bachelor's degree, a feat she achieved while working full time. Her challenges in completing her degree included physical access limitations and lack of accommodations. During her interview, she detailed some of those challenges.

Because I took so long to get through school, I started to find ways to do things myself. I could record my classes on my cellphone, or at least the audio version. I didn't ask for a lot of accommodations. First of all, I didn't think people were willing, and then there was no real formal process. . . Nobody even asked me, "Do you want to submit these accommodations requests? What else do you need? How can we fix your desk? What are the things that you ... Do you want a recording of

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this session?" I would just record them on my phone, and I could go back and listen to them later.

One of the career supports Ms. Tania believed to be critical to her career development was the lack of access to mental health support. Ms. Tania sought out mental health counselors with whom she would meet with periodically just to talk. This assistance was an expense that she was not always able to bear. Her current job recently added that mental health support for its employees. Although it is now available, Ms. Tania is hesitant to take advantage of the support because of stigma associated with those who seek mental health assistance. She is also fearful that,

Nothing is ever really confidential, so if I start having behavioral issues, which I don't think I would ever have, but if I say something with my counselor, would it be a red flag for her to then alert my boss, because they already knew each other and they might have a relationship.

Ms. Tania has recently been promoted on her job after numerous unsuccessful attempts to advance. Her previous bosses were not supportive of her advancement. Although Ms. Tania contemplated resigning, she did not feel that she could obtain new employment.

I had two previous bosses that almost led me to quit, but I held on and I stayed, because the other issue was, as you age as a person with a disability, it's doubly harder to get more employment. I read, and I've seen interviews where ageism happens as early as 35, and you're not that old, to me, so what happens when you have ageism, gender, and disability? I really wanted to stay where I was, and I put up with a lot of things that I shouldn't have had to just to hold on. I mean, I'm glad

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that I did, and the other thing is that I needed a job. I need employment. I need money to live my life, and so I just kind of sucked it up and suffered through a lot of abuse at the hands of two different bosses.

In addition to her work in disability services, Ms. Tania is also a writer, a career she began while still in college. She discussed the importance of relationship building in advancing her career and confessed that she was not always good at building those needed relationships to the detriment of her career. She also bemoaned the fact that her disability impacts her ability to promote her books. She no longer travels by plane because of the difficulties of persons in wheelchairs to travel by that means. She is able to take the train up the eastern seaboard but feels stunted as an independent publisher by the inability to more widely market her books.

### *Dr. Willa*

Dr. Willa is a retired government employee who spent the majority of her career in some type of education-based role as a teacher or a trainer. She completed her government service in a human relations role working on issues for disable workers.

Dr. Willa's experienced the onset of her disability while matriculating through college. As a result of cancer, she became an amputee. She emphasized during her interview that the emotional journey of becoming an amputee has been a long process.

Learning to live with on onset disability is not an overnight process. My self-efficacy, my self-esteem, my self-actualization, all of that they didn't come all together. So, you're dealing with most of yourself. When I lost my leg, it was all about gaining back confidence, gaining back self-esteem because it was challenged.

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After her amputation, Dr. Willa attempted to switch her career plans from the performing arts to other avenues where her desire to perform could still manifest.

So, I would apply for jobs, it's interesting in broadcasting, because I realized my voice was very, very unique. I was being trained for to be a performer. So, I said, "Well, how can I parlay my education in to pursue my passion," because society still was not ready for a black disabled woman, if you will, to show up on stage, even to show up in a newsroom because I tried for different types of jobs, being a reporter was denied, because of my disability, believe in that.

When her plans to join the broadcasting field were unsuccessful, she pivoted again, obtained a doctorate degree in rehabilitation and counseling, and began a career focusing on advancing opportunities for black and brown women with disabilities.

Dr. Willa attributed several factors to her success in advancing her career. Among those factors were her education and the utilization of resources. She stressed the importance of her faith in navigating her career. She also highlighted the struggle with obtaining effective accommodations as a barrier to advancement. Specifically, she pointed out,

So, if you give me everything I need, I'm going to do the work. But if you give me a half of, I guess, an accommodation, if you will. So that means that a half an accommodation looks like something, like for me, I can get to work and I have an elevator to get access to a higher-level floor, but on inclement days, I really don't do very well. And so, if I could work from home and not have to plead with medical documentation and all of this justification as to why working from home would help me to be able to do my work, then that's where you hit the wall and

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the ceiling, because you only going to get so far. Because if those opportunities are not going to be provided to you, based on just mainly accommodating you, then there's no upward mobility.

When asked whether her race, gender, and disability had intersected to affect her career growth, Dr. Willa clearly felt that these identities intersected. She spoke of “triple jeopardy” experienced by African American women with disabilities and the stress that results.

But the insidious thing about triple jeopardy, or living out the trifecta of discrimination, if you will, is that you never know which one is operating, you never know which one is operating. You don't know if you didn't get the job, because you're black. You don't know if you didn't get the job because you're a woman. And you certainly would not know if you got the job because you were the person with a disability. So that's the unfortunate thing about living at the painful intersection of race and gender and disability discrimination, because you never know which one's operating. And that's why it's such a stressful [thing] being [a] black, disabled woman.

### **Patterns Across Cases**

Data for this study was evaluated under an IPA methodology and revealed certain patterns or themes shared by the participants regarding their lived experiences. Each of those themes, and their nested themes are discussed below.

#### ***The Intersection of Social Identities Effect on Career Advancement***

The first research question sought to understand how race, gender, and disability intersected in the lives of the study participants as they sought to advance their careers.

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The premise of the question was that these identities would intersect and have particular impacts on the study participants' careers. The data, however, did not fully support that premise. In several instances, the participants identified one identity as most salient or expressly stated that a particular identity did not play a role in their career progress. For example, Mrs. Ledesi expressly disclaimed race as an impediment in her career, identifying disability as the salient identity. Similarly, Ms. Ayanna conveyed that neither race nor gender had an adverse role in her teaching career.

In some instances, just two of the identities intersected to affect the participants' careers. For only three of the participants, did all three identities interconnect to influence their careers. Finally, some participants shared experiences which reflected shifting salience or combinations of the three identities.

**Race only.** Many of the participants believed race was a factor along their career paths. Ms. Tania spoke of her many attempts to rectify problems on her job, including complaining about the treatment of certain supervisors. For example, she stated,

When I complained, nothing happened, but when other people complained, he [her supervisor] was fired, and so it's like I told you this a year ago, that this was happening to me, and you didn't do anything, and so when other people come along, and it's kind of that. There's an article about white women's tears. Anything but black is still seen as docile, and kind, and has an even keel spirit, whereas I made the same complaints and no-one did anything...

I push back on people when they try to push things on me, and I think some upper management people don't like that style.

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Likewise, Mrs. Bisa thought there were positions she applied for and did not get that went to people less qualified than she who “were of a different hue.” She took those rejection experiences as opportunity creators as she concluded “you have to take everything as it comes and use it to your benefit.”

Dr. Dahlia also thought race impacted her career growth. In her experience, counterparts “who didn’t look like us” received opportunities that were denied African Americans.

Black people not be given same level of services or overlooked or proposals denied because of their names. . . Yes. I've seen many instances where people of color were denied opportunity, denied opportunities for mentorship, denied opportunities for resources, grants, and our counterparts that didn't look like us received it.

**Race and Gender.** The intersection of race and gender emerged as one common theme among some of the participants. Several highlighted how others viewed them in various circumstances. Dr. Willa asserted “our race is forefront, so as a black woman, that's what I show up as. I show up as a black woman first.” Mrs. Kala complained about the perceptions about Black women that unreasonably pigeonhole them.

When it comes to my race or gender, it seems to be I get put in a box because that's the first thing people immediately see. When that's the first thing you see about a person that does present that unique challenge of having to see beyond that. Yes, I'm a black woman but I also love comic books. . . . So yes, it presented that unique challenge in the sense that when they see a black woman, then I all of

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a sudden become the spokesperson for every quote unquote black topic that is going on out there.

Dr. Dahlia also noted that even when granted opportunities, “you always have to, especially one as a black female, anyway, we always have to, it appears in my experience, you always have to prove yourself before people will listen.” Ms. Tania also remarked about stereotypes she has faced as an African American woman - “If you speak up for yourself, it's also being labeled as the angry black woman, when other people get described as passionate and spirited . . . .”

**Race and Disability.** Two of the study participants discussed the impact of race and disability on their careers. When asked about the intersection of race, gender, and disability on her career, Ms. Tania commented that gender was not a factor. She stated,

I think that race and disability are greater than gender. I don't feel ... because when I think about colleagues who are also women, that's not it. It's race and it's a visible disability, because I use a wheelchair, and that's visibly seen.

Dr. Dahlia shared another view into how race and gender intersected in her career journey. She discussed the reactions of others to the skills and energy she brought to her work and her willingness to be a voice for others. She remarked,

And so people that didn't look like us or else they looked like me did not appreciate this. So who is this deaf woman that's coming in with all this energy, that's advocating, telling us that we need to be more inclusive and that we need to cater our services to fit all people, too much power for that deaf woman to have.

Dr. Willa presented another perspective on the general intersection of race and disability. In her view, there was not been a concentration on impact of disability on the

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experiences of African Americans because of a stronger focus on race and racism. She asserted, “the whole sort of disability rights and advocacy around disability was not really talked about because - and particularly among people of color, because we were focused on dealing with the race identity.”

**Gender and Disability.** Ms. Gamila was the participant in the study whose lived experiences most reflected an intersection between gender and disability without the addition of race. Ms. Gamila has a medical syndrome that affects her facial muscles. In response to the question of what identities or combination of identities of race, gender, and disability have impacted her career she indicated

For me, I would say my disability most affected, I would put gender before I even think about race, because I say gender because at that time, I didn't realize. And I'll talk in I terms as opposed to global terms. I didn't realize how much you take your appearance for granted and how much we tie our personal self-worth, if you will, to my appearance until I didn't have my appearance to rely on.

Dr. Willa also hinted at an intersection between gender and disability. Her views about the challenges she faced in her career, included this thought.

The perceptions of when you walk into a room. I mean, as a woman who walks with a limp, walks with a cane, you're always on display. And you're always, in a way having to explain it away.

**Race, Gender, and Disability.** While the first research question centered on the intersection of race, gender, and disability, only three of the study participants linked all three identities to their career experiences. Mrs. Kala exclaimed that “being a black woman with a disability, particularly in America presents unique challenges and

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opportunities. Simply for that reason alone.” In discussing elements that supported her career growth, Mrs. Kala underscored serving on advisory boards. However, she also observed that being a disabled woman of color was an impediment to serving on those boards.

It's unfortunate but there are a lot of stereotypes when it comes to being African-American because of being black and because of being female, to being a person of color, to being a person with a disability and you just have to constantly have those conversations and beat back those stereotypes and beat back those microaggressions and make sure that you know where that is.

Dr. Dahlia and Dr. Willa both spoke about these three intersecting identities. Dr. Dahlia first discussed how her dream of being an astronaut was received by others. She recollected that “at the beginning of my professional career, I was encouraged not to necessarily study aeronautical science because how do I, as a black deaf woman, go up in space?” Dr. Dahlia also explained her view that African American women with disabilities are overlooked and her belief of the reasoning behind that treatment.

But I do see how women of color, deaf women of color have been overlooked just because of the color of our skin, just because when we walk in the room, and they see our us and all of our femaleness, and I'm not sure if every time it's because they don't want to give us the opportunity. I think it's fear.

She also discussed how her education and experiences on paper demonstrated her qualification for certain opportunities, but “when [she] walked into the room, it was a different story.” She also felt that some persons gave her opportunities with little expectation that she would be successful.

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I think that in some cases, people said, "Oh, poor little deaf girl, poor little black girl, let me give her a chance." And then when we showed up to the table, all our identities it was quite surprising. So, in some cases, I can recall where they thought they were doing it to help the poor old black, deaf girl in the workplace. 'Let's give her a chance, something we don't want to do, let her do it.'

Dr. Willa's stated that she shows up as a black woman with disability being a "character trait" that isn't a problem until it is a problem. Her view about race, gender, and disability regarding career progression was "they interact, they interlap, they intersect and they all equally have the same impact, but you never know which one is more impactful."

### *The Effect of Disability on Career Advancement*

This study sought to explore the intertwining of race, gender, and disability on the career progress of the study participants. Data collected during the study demonstrated that among the three identities disability had the greatest perceived impact on career advancement.

**Disability as the Salient Social Identity.** All of the participants, regardless of when they became disabled, discussed some impact their disability has had on their careers. Mrs. Ledesi did not identify any problems on her job until the onset of her disability. As she stated, "I would honestly have to say that my years there were good years. I didn't have a problem there at all until I did have a problem." Ms. Tania connected her inability to travel because of her disability with reduced opportunities to promote her books and therefore reduced book sales. Ms. Gamila spoke of the impact of her disability on "basic things" related to her profession.

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So there were a lot of things that my disability affected that were just basic things. So, there was no going out to eat. There were no impromptu speeches, things like that. And a lot of things that were so tied into my profession that I did every day. My travel schedule was probably 75% because a lot of what I did was talking to our players, doing face-to-face meetings, doing presentations. And so, there was a period where I remember, I stayed home from the office because I did not want to go to work and have anyone look at me the way that I looked.

Dr. Willa declared that she lives with disability every day and described her experience with disability as a daily fight.

Dr. Willa also reflected on the perception others have about the capabilities of persons with disabilities. She asserted,

You got a lot of people not really embracing who you were, because they were so focused on who you were not. I guess they couldn't embrace or embody the idea that you have a disability and you're really capable now, versus looking at you and thinking because you have a disability, you're not capable. So, you're fighting that all the time.

Dr. Dahlia had a similar experience and stated that “those were some challenges of being denied some services or opportunities because people were thinking how they were going to handle it as opposed to how I could produce.”

Mrs. Kala has also faced the “capability inquiry” and the resulting emotional affect. She voiced that there is “anxiety of living with a disability, for fear that somebody is going to mind that opportunity, if you're not willing to prove yourself three, four or

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five times above the next person.” Ms. Ayanna also discussed the unfairness of having to continually prove herself because of her disability.

After years [climbing stairs] puts wear and tear on your body, especially when you're dealing with something like cerebral palsy that's such a physical and demanding disability. I was like, I can't, although I love the children and I love what I do, I can no longer keep putting my body through basically torture because I feel like I have to prove myself to people. I prove myself just like anybody else already by getting the degrees I needed or certifications that I needed. That should have been enough. I was just like, it's not fair and I'm not doing it to myself anymore. So, I stepped away.

**Perception of Disability.** Three of the study participants talked about the perception of disability among both the abled and disabled. The fact that others may not perceive them as being disabled has also had an impact on their experiences. Ms. Tania addressed the role of the perception of disability and contended,

There are other people who also have issues when their disability is not seen where they may not be taken as seriously. It can be just as hard for them because nobody believes they have a disability because they can't see it.

Dr. Dahlia brought attention to the perception of disability in the context of the deaf community.

I will say that in the deaf community, there's something known as the capital Deaf which suggests that that deaf person is Deaf, that's immersed fully, in the Deaf community -- they depend on sign language to communicate. And that's it.

Culturally, everything is the Deaf community. So, persons outside of that have

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been demoted, if you will, to a lowercase deaf. Now on the spectrum, we may not be able to hear just like anybody else, but if we choose, like right now, I'm assimilating with you without an interpreter, and I'm using my voice, so I've already been demoted. So, they've already discriminated against me in that way. So, for the Deaf community, I'm not deaf enough.

Dr. Willa also referenced how disability is perceived and advanced the view that

There's a hierarchy, if you will, in disability, and within a disability community where it's not really talked about, but there is. Who's more disabled than the next person, right? I'm not as disabled as you so therefore I'm a little better than you, if you will.

**Loss of dream or job.** For four of the study participants, their disability was a direct or indirect cause of the loss of their dream career or the loss of their job. The onset of her disability in her collegiate years caused Dr. Willa to lose her dream of being a performing artist.

So, my quest for higher education was motivated by me wanting to be an actress and be a performer. So that was 1974 when I started undergraduate school, and in 1976 everything shifted in terms of to the trajectory of what my interests would now be forced to be and I wouldn't say forced to be but what's the word? Sort of redirected, based on the fact that now I am a person with a disability.

Dr. Willa confessed that she didn't know she could continue to pursue her dream because, while today there is greater inclusion of people with disabilities in the arts, she believed such was not the case in 1976 at the onset of her disability.

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Dr. Dahlia was fascinated with the stars and space and longed to be an astronaut. Although her education qualified her to pursue her dream, her disability was a direct impediment to achieving that dream. “Disappointed that I wasn't encouraged or empowered to move forward, to become an astronaut, I decided to pursue a more people-oriented concepts.”

Ms. Ayanna’s disability was an indirect cause of her leaving the teaching profession. Her boss’ failure to give her the time she needed to navigate public transportation to attend sessions with her mental health professional was a direct cause. However, Ms. Ayanna also noted accessibility also impacted her as she exclaimed “I was like, I can't, although I love the children and I love what I do, I can no longer keep putting my body through basically torture because I feel like I have to prove myself to people.”

Mrs. Ledesi’s disability became the direct reason why she lost her job. Her epilepsy and the resulting memory loss made it impossible for her to continue in her nursing position.

The fact [is] that I felt like I had to stop working because I wasn't capable of doing the job that I was hired to do. And I felt like I could still work and be productive, but they didn't seem to have a spot for me to do that, or try to make a spot for me. . . I lost everything really because I couldn't work anymore. And I went for quite a while trying to even to get disability.

**Emotional Impact.** Many of the study participants commented on the emotional impact of living with a disability. Beyond the physical struggles that sometimes accompany their disability, there are also struggles with emotional health. Ms. Ayanna

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discussed her struggles with mental health and her attempts to meet with mental health professionals. Similarly, Ms. Tania identified mental health assistance as a significant support for her career. Ms. Gamila described the emotional impact she experienced with the onset her disability.

It really, really, really affected me emotionally. My disability also, and it's been so long now that I can't remember the exact timeframe, it's a disability where I went through stages in the severity of my recovery or where I was on the recovery phase as far as treatment.

....

I had to find my own cadence to get back into family gatherings and try and be a happy person and not be a sad person. And that was a lot harder than just being like a hermit. And so, I think the emotional part and the basically driving yourself, is just as important sometime, I think, in getting emotionally where you need to be, regardless of what you look like physically.

When Mrs. Bisa first received her diagnosis of multiple sclerosis, because of her perceptions about herself, she did not want others to know of her diagnosis. She admitted, "When I was first diagnosed with multiple sclerosis, I didn't want people to know. I didn't want to get handicap tags. I didn't want to use a cane. I didn't want to talk about it."

However, over the years, her attitude about her disability changed. She emphasized:

I am not hiding my condition. I am not ashamed of having multiple sclerosis. I would rather educate you about it and help you understand that just because I have this condition, it doesn't mean that I'm unable to do my job.

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Once Mrs. Ledesi discovered what was happening to her as a result of her epilepsy, she became emotional when she concluded she could not work any longer in her chosen career. She described the isolation she felt – “I felt I couldn't work and I was out on an island by myself.”

Dr. Willa also recounted that when she first became disabled, she didn't embrace her disability. She “didn't even like the word” disabled. Dr. Willa also asserted that the emotional relationship with disability is constant. She maintained that “emotionally of course, and you never end that journey of the emotional relationship you have with your disability, because society doesn't allow you to forget it.”

### *The Tools Used to Navigate Career*

The study participants spotlighted numerous factors as supports or barriers to their career successes. Some of those supports and barriers emanated from the participants themselves, while others were provided from outside sources including employers and mentors. Some of the tools – accommodations, networking/relationship building, the role of faith, mentors, and self-talk/self-reflection - are discussed further below.

**Accommodations.** Some of the study participants discussed how the abled sometimes see accommodations different from the disabled. For example, Ms. Ayanna, who has cerebral palsy which impacts her gait, asked for an accommodation of a railing for steps entering the school. School administrators were excited about meeting her request. However, the accommodation was less than ideal. As Ms. Ayanna shared:

I can remember one of the schools I worked with, the one with the railing, the principal was so excited. One year she told me, this was after three years of working there, [Ms. Ayanna], we finally got a railing put on by the steps. I go out

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and look out the front door and I'm like where? It was on the back end of the school, not the front.

Similarly, Dr. Willa expressed her frustration with the quality or extent of certain accommodations. She noted:

Half an accommodation looks like something, like for me, like I can get to work and I have an elevator to get access to a higher level floor, but on inclement days, I really don't do very well. And so if I could work from home and not have to plead with medical documentation and all of this justification as to why working from home would help me to be able to do my work.

Other study participants also talked about accommodations. Mrs. Bisa shared her varied experience with receiving accommodations. After her first exacerbation that impacted her sight, her company accommodated her with a temporary position that did not require reading. However, with subsequent exacerbations that impacted her mobility, her then supervisor was unwilling to let her work from home. He considered her to be sick and therefore she should take sick days. She exclaimed,

I didn't say I was sick. Being sick and having multiple sclerosis are two different things. When you're sick -- something you recover from, this is a chronic incurable condition that you learn to work with and to accommodate. So, I'm not saying that I'm sick, I don't need to take sick leave, I'm asking to work from home to maintain my productivity and to not have to expend so much energy.

Chronic fatigue is also one of the major symptoms of multiple sclerosis.

Prior to the Covid 19 event, Mrs. Bisa had to fight management to telework. Indeed, in a multi-page questionnaire, management questioned her physician as to whether Mrs. Bisa

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could work from home. Her physician provided a singular response “basically stating there is no reason with her job description that she should not be able to work from home.”

Ms. Tania also declared her frustration with bosses who were unwilling to grant her telework.

Only in the last two years have I really advanced in my career. I think there's still a lot of prejudice. I really suffered a lot of prejudice in the last five years with certain bosses who did not ... one, did not want to let me have flex time to work from home, if I had a wheelchair issue or it broke down.

Similarly, she related how with the onset of the Covid 19 event how the ability to telework has impacted her:

I'm happy to be working from home is an understatement. I am ecstatic, because I have everything I need and I can be comfortable, but also the thing that annoyed me is how supervisors and executive directors power tripped when people with disabilities asked to work from home and you're denied, and now all of a sudden you have to work from home, and no, it's fine. We'll get you a computer, and we'll get you a cell phone, and we'll pay for some of your internet access.

Ms. Ayanna also admitted that her experience with accommodations varied. When she worked at a school for students with special needs, the school had access accommodations for both the students and her. Also, at one middle school where she worked the “particular school, the staff was very, very, very supportive. The school was ADA compliant, they had elevators that I could use. If I needed help in my classroom my team would come in and help me.”

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In contrast to these experiences, Ms. Ayanna worked at one school where the classroom was on the third floor of a non-elevator building but the accessible bathroom was on the first floor. She also spoke on other types of accommodations, like a teacher's aide for the teacher.

I think if it were more of an option to have an aide for the teacher herself, where a lot of physical things could be taken off of the teacher whether it be male or female. I feel like education would be broadened so much more.

**Networking/Relationship Building.** Many of the study participants regarded networking and relationship building as important tools they used to build their careers. Mrs. Bisa made a distinction between networking and relationship building. For her, networking is self-serving while relationship building is interpersonal. Mrs. Bisa reflected on the importance of relationship building.

I think relationship building is very important not to be self-serving, but because you can learn so much from other people, especially those outside of what you do. You can talk to people and get a completely different perspective and maybe what they do, processes that they use in the work that they do, can inform something that you're doing. But if you don't talk to people, then you never know.

Ms. Tania also spoke about relationships and how failure to build relationships can be a detriment to career building.

There's somewhat of an art to that, something that I also never really learned, about building relationships, and there's also no reset, so if I wanted to try to go back and try to be this chummy, approachable person, my slate was always the

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strong-willed advocate black woman. Once you're labeled a certain way, it will never change for you with that person.

She further provided a recommendation to others regarding their career building. She charged, “if you were going to give any parting advice in your paper, it's really about building those relationships, and learning the communication style early on, and finding the right supports to help you navigate those things that you need.”

Ms. Gamila, Mrs. Kala, and Dr. Willa touted the benefits of networking for their careers. Mrs. Kala denominated networking as critical and a linchpin in her career. She exclaimed that “those have been very helpful relationships as well. Relationships that moved me onto some really amazing fellowships and things of that nature.” Ms. Gamila echoed that view. “I learned early on, [about] the power of networking and the power of basically just getting a door opened and I could do the rest, meaning my experience.” Dr. Willa joined that chorus and offered “being informed, having just access to people who can help you, who can help navigate and sort of get you around some of those potholes that I had no lessons about. So, networking has been really very, very helpful.”

**The Role of Faith.** Several of the study participants credited aspects of their career advancement to their faith. For example, Mrs. Bisa included her church as a career enhancer and Dr. Dahlia credited God with opening up some opportunities. Indeed, Dr. Dahlia sees part of her business as a ministry – “If I could show God through me and my actions, that's what I want to do.”

When asked about career supports, Mrs. Ayanna also talked about the role of her church. She stated,

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I tend to make sure I stay connected with people from my church, the activities that I enjoyed at church, making sure I went to church on Sundays and did a few Bible studies throughout the week. That actually kept me grounded.

Dr. Willa was the most vocal about the role of her faith in her career. She attributed even her ability to talk about her career to her faith.

[B]ut again, my faith is like, what you're experiencing now is all because of faith, my faith, my journey and walk my spirituality, everything. This is not about I got, read this in a book. This is all about my spiritual beliefs and how that has taken me to where I am today.

**Mentors.** Ms. Gamila spoke of the positive experience she had with mentors. Initially she contemplated the term mentor and came to the conclusion that her mentorship relationships developed naturally. She expounded on that thought by reflecting:

But the more I think about it, I think mentors in my life have kind of developed naturally. And then that was just like, "You know what? That person is already serving in a mentor role, whether you formally called them that or not." I don't necessarily think that people sought me out to be a mentee. I think it's the same thing. We just kind of fell into this role and it was like, "Okay, I think this is kind of like a mentor or mentee like thing."

These mentors pushed her beyond her comfort zone. From a value perspective, Ms. Gamila felt that she would not have advanced as far in her career without the influence of her mentors. She also shared, however, that all of her mentors were men. In fact, Ms.

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Gamila considered it ironic that all four of the persons she considered her mentors were men:

And I have to tell you, ironically, all of my early mentors have been men. And I don't know, when I think about it, that this just again, because of the industry that I'm in and those were the people that were in the positions to give me an opportunity. And now I find myself kind of like reaching back and being a mentor now to other young ladies in the industries, but there just weren't a lot of women around when I was coming into the industry. So, by default, those gentlemen just kind of fell into that mentor role for me.

Mrs. Bisa stated that she did not have mentors. Yet, she placed a great deal of emphasis on the importance of relationships in her career. She indicated that she had “relationships with people above and below me that were always very helpful. I don't throw people away. . . I carry them with me and I have found that to be helpful.” She also related how because of a relationship she was able to obtain her current position.

[W]ith most organizations, relationships are very important. And so, when I got the position that I'm currently in, it was because of the relationship I had with the director. Didn't know it at the time, but he was getting ready to retire and he made sure that I was taken care of before he did. I had no clue that's what was going on, but that's what it was.

**Self-Talk/Self-Reflection.** One theme that all of the participants talked about involved self-talk or self-reflection. Sometimes the theme manifested in statements about pushing through while at other times the study participants expressed thoughts about survival.

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Ms. Gamila spoke about how after the onset of her disability she had to talk with herself about how she was going to see her world.

I kind of had to sit down and give myself a pep talk and say, "Okay, you know what? You can feel sorry for yourself and be a hermit your entire life, a social hermit and all of that." Or I can say, you could stop this pity game and just be thankful because things could always be worse. And I think that when I kind of checked my own attitude and started being thankful and being a glass half full instead of half empty.

Likewise, after Ms. Ayanna lost her teaching position, she struggled with whether she should have acceded to her principal's request about taking on after-work responsibilities.

Ms. Ayanna confessed,

I kind of beat myself up about it and was like, well maybe I should have just did what she wanted and I would still have a job. But then the more I thought about it I was like, no, you got to do what you got to do to take care of yourself because clearly no one is going to do it for you but you.

Dr. Dahlia also talked about having to prove yourself to others and how that impacts your thinking about yourself. In her case, both the hearing and deaf communities presented challenges for her.

I got to a point where you either accept it or either you don't, but I think that's also about how I see myself. I don't have to keep proving to everybody that I'm deaf or I'm not deaf. I don't have to keep proving to everybody that I'm qualified or not qualified. If what you see on paper, that's the service that you want. We're happy to provide it. But I think that at the very beginning, we all go through well, maybe

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not all, but many people feel like I have to prove myself to get the salaries that I want. I have to prove myself to stay here and to be here. And perhaps I thought that I needed to do that when I was working for that government agency, trying to be the first black deaf astronaut. But they weren't even hearing me back then. They were the ones that were being deaf if you will.

Mrs. Kala shared a similar sentiment when discussing the impediment of “bad” supervisors. She concluded, “as an employee you have to decide how much you can take mentally and physically. You have to decide what is going to be your path forward. Then just have a good prayer for peace and release.”

Dr. Willa and Ms. Gamila discussed the need to push through circumstances. Dr. Willa shared how failures could serve as an impetus for pushing through. She exclaimed that “I had to navigate a lot on my own learning by failure, and building strength along the way. I think, that's what's built my character, is having the, you got a lot of nos.” Ms. Gamila characterized this pushing through as resiliency.

I think that I learned early on to be very resilient, to keep pushing for those opportunities or looking for different ways to advance my career. . . You learn how to make your own seat at the table, be very resilient. I think if you hear no five different ways, then you got to find a way for the sixth time to turn it and say yes.

Sometimes the participants described self-talk/self-reflection from a survival perspective. For example, Dr. Willa lamented the costs of being disabled in her statement “living with a disability is not cheap. And so, I knew that I had to make a way, a stable life for myself.” Ms. Tania expressed the need for survival during her discussion of why she decided to remain on a job where she was not advancing.

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I had two previous bosses that almost led me to quit, but I held on and I stayed, because the other issue was, as you age as a person with a disability, it's doubly harder to get more employment. . . . I really wanted to stay where I was, and I put up with a lot of things that I shouldn't have had to just to hold on. I mean, I'm glad that I did, and the other thing is that I needed a job. I need employment. I need money to live my life, and so I just kind of sucked it up and suffered through a lot of abuse at the hands of two different bosses.

### *Intersecting Identities Effect on Career Barriers and Supports*

The second research question sought to understand how the social identities of race, gender, and disability intersected to affect the supports or barriers African American women with physical disabilities receive or encounter as they navigate their careers. For most of the participants, these three social identities did not intersect in perceived ways that impacted career supports and barriers. As discussed above, the study participants discussed a variety of tools they used to facilitate their careers and recounted barriers that impeded their careers. However, many of the supports and barriers were unrelated to race, gender, or disability.

There were two exceptions. First, in regard to disability, the availability of accommodations operated as either a positive force or a stumbling block to career advancement. In discussing the importance of accommodations, Dr. Willa drew on the comments of an unnamed researcher and stated "Give people what they need and they will perform. So if you give me everything I need, I'm going to do the work." Dr. Willa further maintained because disabled persons have been denied so much, they are "catching up," and need greater levels of accommodations. However, the study

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participants discussion of accommodation was focused solely on disability. They did not discuss how their race or gender impacted the quality of or the efforts needed to obtain accommodations. Thus, there was little to no intersection among the identities studied. The role of mentors was the second exception and is discussed below.

Some study participants did discuss, from an intersectionality viewpoint, the supports or barriers mentors played on career progress. Dr. Dahlia, in discussing her journey in starting her own business, identified a man who was at one point a competitor and at another time a partner and a mentor. She said this gentleman empowered her “to take it up a notch and to incorporate some skills that I didn't know that I had.” At the same time, Dr. Dahlia noted:

No, there was no other deaf woman, black female, doing what I was doing. At that time, there were no other black deaf professionals seeking to start their own businesses. So, I didn't have that in a lot of areas. I was the first one.

Dr. Willa echoed a similar sentiment. She discussed the dearth of Black female disabled mentors. Specifically, she noted that “there weren't many people reaching out helping you to navigate this landscape of being a black disabled woman. Why? Because many people didn't know it themselves.”

Mrs. Kala also spoke of the prominent role mentors played in her career. She discussed the importance of formal mentors and related how there were persons who sought her out to develop a mentor-mentee relationship.

There were a couple of people that actually said, ‘We've heard that you're doing some really good stuff and would like to work with you and to see how we can push you in this direction.’ Those have been very helpful relationships as well.

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Relationships that moved me onto some really amazing fellowships and things of that nature . . . .

Mrs. Kala and Ms. Tania also talked about the importance of peer mentors. Both are part of a Black women with disability group that meets once a week to share ideas and resources. Mrs. Kala declared,

[w]e call ourselves the black female disable round table and we are there to help bounce ideas off of each other, share resources. We can't read everything, we can't catch it all, and to look for opportunities and angles that one may not be able to see. I think mentors are essential.

Ms. Tania, who unlike Mrs. Kala had no formal mentor relationships, reiterated the importance of this peer mentor group. She wished she had joined the group earlier. She, too, described the peer group and its importance for her. Specifically, she asserted that the sessions with these peer mentors give her

an opportunity to laugh and share, and I feel like one of them has been an extremely good mentor about moving ahead, and all four of them were ...women with disabilities and women of color. But one of them has sent me resources, and some of it almost feels a bit too late, but I still like reading it, looking at it.

### **Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to examine the intersection of race, gender, and disability on the lived experiences of African American women with physical disabilities along their career paths. For most of the participants, they did not associate all three of their identities with their experiences in their careers. Notably, two out of three of those

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who did discuss the intersection of all three identities were the among the three oldest participants in the study.

There is a scarcity of literature discussing the intersection of these three identities on career advancement. Therefore, it is difficult to draw conclusions regarding whether the results of this data are aligned with findings in current literature.

The study results showed that among the three identities, disability was the most salient for these participants. Each participant attributed at least one career-related experience to their disability. Some of the obstacles the literature points out as experienced by disabled persons were reflected in the results. Included among these are the belief that disabled persons are less capable than their abled counterparts (Bonaccio et al., 2020), the importance of relationships (Kulkarni, 2012), and the role of mentors (Emira et al., 2018). The results are also congruent with research that credits self-motivating behaviors like persistence (Noonan et al., 2004) as a support for career growth for people with disabilities.

One factor that emerged from the study and is not fully discussed in the literature that may explain some of the participant's experiences is environment. For example, neither Mrs. Ledesi nor Ms. Ayanna identified race or gender as factors in their career progression. Both of these participants worked in careers that are traditionally populated by women, nursing and early childhood education. Both also worked for employers who were predominantly African American. In other words, neither Mrs. Ledesi nor Ms. Ayanna were "minorities" in their places of employment.

Contrast, however, the experience of Ms. Gamila, a woman working in a male-dominated industry. Ms. Gamila was the only study participant for whom gender and

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disability intersected to impact her career. This is especially telling because Ms. Gamila's disability affected her face and attractiveness.

Another outcome of the research was the fact that not everyone is interested in traditional notions of career advancement. Wilson-Kovacs et al. (2008) found that self-limiting behaviors such as failure to apply for promotions explain some of the challenges people with disabilities face with their careers. However, some of the study participants were happy and satisfied to function in staff positions. Neither Mrs. Bisa nor Ms. Ayanna were interested in management positions. And, Mrs. Ledesi, although a charge nurse, did not seek advancement.

### **Summary**

The findings of the study demonstrated that the experiences of African American woman with physical disabilities are varied. While the research questions implicitly assumed that race, gender, and disability would intersect to affect career progression and the supports and barriers to that movement, the study showed that all three identities did not always intersect. For some participants, some smaller combination of the three identities were more prominent in their experiences. However, all of the study participants experienced some impact to their careers because of their disability. The study participants' experiences related to their disability serve as a basis for the proposed solutions that are discussed in the next chapter.

**CHAPTER FIVE: PROPOSED SOLUTION AND IMPLICATIONS**

African American women with physical disabilities face a variety of obstacles along their career paths in obtaining leadership and decision-making positions. Scholars have explored whether racism and sexism intersect to create some of these obstacles. However, there is a shortage of research examining how disability may also intersect with race and gender to impact career growth.

This qualitative study, based on an interpretative phenomenological approach, sought to expand on this body of research by examining the lived experiences of African American women with physical disabilities along their career paths, including the supports and barriers they encountered. Data collected from interviews, observations, and archival reviews served as a basis for several recommendations to address the problems the study participants identified.

This chapter discusses the aim of the study, several proposed solutions, implementation strategies for those solutions, and evaluation tools to assess the effectiveness of the solutions. The chapter further provides insights on the practical implications of this research, suggestions for future research, and associations with leadership theory.

**Aim Statement**

This study aimed to identify strategies to address any identified barriers to career progression for African American women with physical disabilities. The research also supports an additional aim – to broaden the understanding of decision-makers of the challenges African American women with physical disabilities face in advancing their careers.

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### **Proposed Solutions**

This study focused on the intersection of race, gender, and disability on career progression for African American college-educated women with physical disabilities. Several themes emerged from the study, including: (a) the intersection of and lack of intersection of social identities effect on career advancement; (b) the effect of disability on career advancement; (c) the tools used to navigate careers; and (d) how the intersection of social identities affect career supports and barriers. Based on these themes, the solutions for addressing the obstacles that African American women with physical disabilities face as they progress in their careers require action by both organizational leaders and the women themselves. Two of the solutions proposed focus on organizational leaders. Both organizations and employees share responsibility for the third solution. Also, because the study found that disability was the salient identity that affected the participants' lived experiences, two of the three proposed solutions concentrate on that identity. The third proposed solution covers all three identities.

- Recommendation One - Organizational leadership should engage in training and implement behaviors that reduce barriers to the career growth of African American women with disabilities by recognizing aspects of ableism that question the capability of disabled employees.
- Recommendation Two - Organizational leadership should increase career opportunities for persons with disabilities by granting more effective accommodations.

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- Recommendation Three - Organizational leaders should institute or improve mentorship programs for African American women with physical disabilities. Employees should take advantage of mentorship opportunities.

### **Recommendation 1: Recognize Disabled Employee Capabilities**

Scholars have identified the belief held by supervisors that persons with disabilities are less capable than those without disabilities as an impediment to career growth for persons with disabilities (Bonaccio et al., 2020). Several of the participants in the study related experiences that demonstrated this impediment as supervisors and others questioned their ability to perform solely based on their disability. Ms. Ayanna talked about her interview experience where she was specifically asked how she would run after children in the classroom instead of her pedagogical skills. Mrs. Kala also faced an interviewer who questioned whether the fact that she has multiple sclerosis would make Mrs. Kala more prone to be sick and unavailable to work. Mrs. Bisa detailed how her supervisor assumed that she could no longer travel, an element of her job, because of her multiple sclerosis.

Organizational leaders may not realize that ableist perspectives influence their views about the capability of people with disabilities. Yet, the responsibility for eliminating ableist thinking that negatively affects career progression for African American women with physical disabilities resides with organizational leadership.

One tool available to tackle ableism is training. Training that unearths ableist attitudes can assist leaders in understanding when they are operating with a narrowed view about the capability of disabled employees. Being receptive to such training can change mindsets.

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Organizations should implement deliberate initiatives to identify and provide training to organizational leaders, including hiring officials and promotion decision-makers, regarding recognition of ableist attitudes that restrict career growth for persons with disabilities. Staff-level training is also necessary to broaden perspectives that differently-abled does not equate to unable. In addition, organizations should consider hiring human resource personnel who focus on training regarding disability matters, providing effective accommodations, and supporting disabled personnel.

### *Challenges to Recommendation 1*

A training-based solution to address leadership bias that assumes that disabled employees are less capable than abled employees may be cost-prohibitive for some organizations. Firms may not have in-house personnel who can provide the training needed and may not have the budgetary space to engage external trainers. To overcome such financial obstacles, organizations can leverage resources from organizations that support the disabled community as an avenue for training.

Training is more effective when there is an opportunity to apply the training. If a leader does not currently lead any disabled employees, application of the training may be lost and mindsets unaltered. Thus, if an employee becomes disabled or the opportunity to hire or promote a disabled person is not in close proximity to the training, the effectiveness of the training may be diminished.

To counteract this proximity problem, leaders can work with disabled affinity groups. These groups can serve not only as support groups for disabled employees but resources for organizational leaders. Organizational leaders who participate in such groups can learn first-hand from disabled employees across the organization what they

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are doing and the barriers and supports they are encountering. This knowledge-gathering opportunity is a form of training that can also be useful in broadening leadership's perspectives of the capabilities of disabled employees.

However, leadership's participation in affinity groups might create a challenge for some employees. The power disparity between leaders and followers could make some attendees uncomfortable or stifle sharing during affinity gatherings. To mitigate this drawback, leaders could attend by special invitation. These invitations could both alert the membership of leadership's interest in their work and also give affinity members the choice of whether to attend and participate with leadership present.

There are other types of "on the job" training organizations can utilize that would not be cost-prohibitive. For example, organizations can also reduce ableist attitudes that are detrimental to the career growth of African American with physical disabilities by listening to the voices and observing the performance of their disabled employees. While it is not the responsibility of the disabled community to change ableist attitudes, demonstrated skill and a raised voice can show leaders that disabled persons are capable of performing at high levels and in higher complexity positions.

In addition, providing disabled employees with stretch assignments can help dispel ableist views. Such stretch assignments give disabled employees the opportunity to demonstrate their capabilities. However, similar to other employees, leaders should allow disabled employees the opportunity to fail, parlaying challenges into lessons learned and opportunities for improvement.

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### **Recommendation 2: Provide Effective Accommodations**

Many of the study participants pointed to the quality of accommodations as a help or hindrance to their careers. For example, Ms. Ayanna spoke about the accommodations at one school that eased her working as a teacher and the lack of accommodations at another school that impeded her career. Similarly, Dr. Willa and Ms. Ayanna spoke about partial accommodations that did not meet their needs and thus were ineffective supports for them.

Organizational leaders are responsible for providing effective accommodations to disabled staff. Useful accommodations may not be determined by checking off a list of accommodations that could be made available. Rather, leadership should endeavor to understand what accommodations are most effective for their disabled employees. In addition, disabled employees should partner with leadership in achieving this goal by being explicit about their needs and seek changes when the accommodations provided are insufficient to meet those needs.

One accommodation that was mentioned by several of the participants was the ability to work from home. During the current pandemic, employers witnessed how employees can be productive and highly beneficial for their organizations while working from home. Several study participants spoke about their increased productivity when working from home (e.g., Mrs. Bisa and Ms. Tania). As organizations implement their new normal, accommodating people with disabilities via telework arrangements, either permanent or intermittent, even if other employees return to physical offices, can effectively support career advancement for the disabled employee population.

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### *Challenges to Recommendation 2*

There are also some difficulties in providing adequate accommodations. As with training, some accommodations may be cost-prohibitive. For example, Mrs. Ledesi asked for an accommodation that would remove her from direct patient care to guard against the dangers created by the memory loss associated with her disability. However, paying Mrs. Ledesi the same salary for work that could have been performed by lesser skilled personnel was not economically sound for her employer.

Providing the ability to telework was suggested by several study participants as helpful for their career progress. However, not all positions are conducive to telework arrangements. Additionally, questions of fairness and resulting morale issues may arise as non-disabled employees also request the option of teleworking.

Finally, some effective accommodations may only be achieved after trial and error. The period where both employees and leaders are testing out an accommodation can be frustrating to both parties and may cause leaders to see disabled employees as presenting problems leaders do not encounter with abled co-workers. Such a result is opposite to what disabled employees want leaders to believe about their capacity to perform.

### **Recommendation 3: Creating and Promoting Mentoring**

Scholars recognize that positive mentor relationships can promote career advancement (Van Vianen et al., 2018). Mentors or the lack of mentors played prominent roles in the study participants' experiences. Ms. Gamila credited mentors for pushing her beyond her comfort zone, and she found immense value in her mentor relationships. Likewise, Mrs. Kala recounted how both formal and peer mentors played essential roles

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in her career development. Ms. Tania credited her peer mentors with supporting her career journey. On the other hand, Dr. Willa and Dr. Dahlia pointed to a lack of available mentors during their careers, and Ms. Ayanna acknowledged that she was unaware of any opportunities for mentorship during her teaching career.

The experiences of the study participants evince that mentorship can be formal and informal. Organizational leadership can create or actively support mentoring relationships for employees with disabilities on either of these bases. Organizations can create or enhance existing mentorship programs to target and incorporate disabled employees by leveraging known successful programs and by seeking input from potential mentees. Mentoring programs cannot be one size fits all. They will need to be flexible to meet the individual needs of the mentee.

Successful mentoring programs do not necessarily require mentors also be part of the disabled community. It may be challenging to create a cadre of disabled employees to serve as mentors, given an organization's size. One way organizations can meet this challenge is again by utilizing disabled employee affinity groups to promote informal mentoring opportunities. These types of peer mentoring opportunities may form more naturally and provide a more comfortable experience for the participants.

Disabled employees also have responsibility for making mentorships a career enhancement. If disabled employees are not approached by persons wanting to serve as mentors, employees should identify persons within or without their organizations and on a formal or informal basis to serve in that capacity. Disabled employees who are seeking out mentors may need to ask more than one person before they are successful in developing a positive mentor relationship.

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### *Challenges to Recommendation 3*

As with the previous solutions suggested above, creating or supporting existing mentoring programs is an imperfect solution. It requires the ability, willingness, and availability of persons to serve as mentors. In many organizations, there may be few, if any African American women with disabilities who can serve as mentors. And, African American women with disabilities who can function as mentors should not be overtaxed in that service.

In organizations where there are no African American women with disabilities available, disabled employees may feel that persons who are not African American, women, or disabled will not understand their needs, thus making the development of effective mentoring relationships more difficult.

### **Factors and Stakeholders Related to the Implementation of the Solution**

#### **Stakeholders**

A variety of stakeholders are needed to implement the solutions suggested here successfully. First, senior leadership in organizations must embrace diversity, equity, and inclusion as crucial for the success of their organization. An organization's culture emanates from the top (Shapiro & Naughton, 2015). Senior leadership's embrace of people with disabilities as capable employees who bring value to an organization is critical. Senior leadership controls the budgets that support training and mentoring programs. Moreover, they provide the direction that other stakeholders implement.

Human resource departments and personnel are also important stakeholders. The recommended solutions include using the expertise of human resource professionals to identify and implement training, determine how well the organization is supporting the

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career goals of African American women with disabilities, and evaluate the programs, training, and systems that promote career growth for this population.

Frontline supervisors are also necessary stakeholders. They are closest to the employees and are more able to impact career growth directly. Several of the study participants spoke about bosses who made their career journey difficult. Other participants praised their supervisors for the support they provided in growing their careers. Supervisors play a vital role in providing employees the opportunity to demonstrate capacity in how they allocate assignments and the feedback they give employees. They also have a lens into mentorship needs and opportunities.

Co-workers are additional stakeholders whose actions are important to the success of the recommended solutions. In conjunction with social comparison, leader-exchange theory teaches that the perspectives of co-workers are part of a leader's development of high- or low-quality relationships (Festinger, 1954). Moreover, as many work assignments are team-based, the views of co-workers concerning the capabilities of disabled teammates are vital to the quality of relationships. Therefore, co-workers should also participate in training designed to increase appreciation for the capabilities of disabled employees.

Disabled employees are special stakeholders in the implementation of the recommended solutions. While leaders play a significant role in the opportunities for career advancement for persons with disabilities, they do not act alone. As with abled employees, persons with disabilities have a central role in their own career advancement. That role cannot be passive. While it is not the disabled employee's responsibility to change ableist attitudes of organizational leaders, disabled employees do need to take

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advantage of the available supports, advocate for themselves, seek out mentoring relationships, develop resiliency, and position themselves for advancement.

Relying on disabled employees to speak up when leaders assume they are less capable may not benefit the employee. Depending on their circumstances, people with disabilities may find it difficult to be their own champions for fear of negative repercussions. Mrs. Kala articulated this obstacle when she stated,

You never know if you're going to say the wrong thing that's going to put you in a bad light that will then send you down a wrong path that you could become terminated and, or become blackballed in this community because it still does happen.

Ms. Tania also recognized this obstacle when she referenced how her speaking up put her in danger of being branded an “angry Black woman.” Leadership holds the upper hand in the power relationship with its followers. Therefore, leadership should not simply rely on complaints from members of their workforce who are disabled as a means of appreciating the capabilities of those employees.

Moreover, disabled employees should add the support of persons outside of their workspaces to their tools to advance their careers. Mrs. Bisa spoke about the support she received from her church and through her sorority, a community-based organization.

Miss Ayanna also referenced the support she received through her church and friends.

Miss Tania and Mrs. Kala championed the peer group of disabled African American women they meet with frequently. These peer groups and friend clusters can be used as sounding boards to discuss opportunities and strategies to meet identified career goals.

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### **Timeline for Implementation of the Solution**

The three solutions suggested here can be implemented one by one or as a multi-faceted effort to increase the inclusion of African American women with disabilities and reduce barriers to that inclusion. Changing the mindset of supervisors and other stakeholders regarding the ability of persons with disabilities to perform well and master complex tasks is achievable but not instantly.

The benefits of training and impactful mentorships may only be realized over a period of time. Moreover, supervisors and co-workers will need to have the opportunity to apply the training they receive. However, one successful completion of a stretch assignment by a disabled employee could accelerate a supervisor's understanding of that employee's capabilities.

On the other hand, providing effective accommodations, such as allowing permanent or intermittent teleworking arrangements, may be achieved over shorter periods. Supervisors and employees may need to experiment with different accommodations before the most effective accommodations are identified and implemented. However, in some situations, that experimentation can begin shortly after an employee makes an accommodation request.

Additionally, there may be budgetary constraints to overcome before some accommodations could be granted. Also, organizations may need some time to develop policies to address some accommodations, for example, teleworking or alternative work schedules, to ensure fairness for all employees.

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### **Evaluating the Outcome of Implementing the Solutions**

The desired aims of the recommended solutions are a greater opportunity for disabled employees to demonstrate capability, increased career supports, and decreased career barriers. There are several evaluative tools leaders can employ to determine whether these goals are being achieved.

First, leaders can review hiring, internal rotation, and promotion statistics to assess whether persons with disabilities are hired, given internal opportunities, and promoted. The assessment should be made against realistic goals that are commensurate with the size of the organization. In those areas of the organization where goals are met, leaders should analyze what behaviors drive positive results and socialize those behaviors across the organization. Conversely, if the analysis reveals conduct detrimental to career growth for this population, leaders should work to eliminate those behaviors.

Second, organizations can survey their employees to identify if they have positive work experiences or encounter impediments to their career growth. The surveys should include the opportunity for employees to comment on the behaviors that underlie their responses.

Outside of surveys and statistical assessments, leaders can interact directly with followers to evaluate progress in implementing the suggested solutions. Leaders can conduct meetings with the direct reports of the managers they manage, i.e., “skip-level” meetings with employees, specifically designed to discover experiences related to career growth. These conversations can serve a two-fold purpose. They can help develop relationships between followers and more senior-level leadership. Second, they can provide employees a safe place to talk about supervisor behaviors that promote or

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suppress career growth. Leaders can further directly evaluate the success of their initiatives by actively listening while participating in affinity groups to obtain first-hand accounts of employees' experiences.

### **Implications**

#### **Practical Implications**

African American women with physical disabilities comprise an appreciable percentage of the workforce. However, they sometimes struggle to obtain leadership positions in their organizations. They may not know which of their identities – race, gender, or disability - or whether the intersection of their identities is the reason behind their career challenges.

The findings from this study demonstrate that sometimes a singular identity and at other times a combination of the three identities play a role in the participants' experiences with career growth. However, one insight from the study is for many of the participants, their disability was a salient identity that impacted their career progression.

A diverse and inclusive workforce is a valuable asset for organizations. The findings from this study raise questions of whether some of the study participants were victims of not only microaggressions but macroaggressions that rose to the level of illegal conduct. Organizations should not tolerate conduct by leaders who engage in intentional conduct that discriminates against employees based on race, gender, or disability. Where such conduct exists, leaders should be held accountable.

However, leaders may sometimes behave in unintentional ways that result in barriers for disabled employees. The solutions recommended serve as methods leaders can use to improve inclusion of African American women with physical disabilities in the

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fabric of their organizations by providing greater opportunities for this population to progress to leadership positions.

### **Implications for Future Research**

This study was purposefully limited by race, gender, and physical disability. However, some of the study participants' experiences evidence a need for future studies surrounding intersectionality and its impact on career progression for African American women with physical disabilities. The role of age as an intersectional factor is a topic future research should consider in assessing whether any of the three identities of race, gender, and disability are more salient in career development. This suggestion derives from the fact that two of the three participants who specifically discussed the intersection of race, gender, and disability were among the oldest participants in the study.

The study also included participants who experienced disability at different points relative to their careers. Future research exploring experiences based on when the onset of disability occurred – birth, pre-career, or during their career (including early, middle, or late stages) would add the understanding of how persons with disabilities navigate their careers.

There is a dearth of scholarly research on the intersection of race, gender, and disability on various social phenomena (Erevelles & Minear, 2010). This lack of research includes studying factors that impact the career growth of African American women with disabilities. As a result, several additional areas of future study emerge from the experiences the study participants shared.

One is the role of faith in the career progression of this population. Ms. Bisa, Dr. Dahlia, Ms. Ayanna, and Dr. Willa all identified their faith as a support for their career.

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Second is the perception of severity of physical disability. Both Dr. Dahia and Dr. Willa discussed how the perceptibility of disability impacted their careers. The third is the availability of mental health services as a career support. Ms. Ayanna and Ms. Tania highlighted the need for such support.

### **Implications for Leadership Theory and Practice**

The recommended solutions emanating from the findings of this study are designed to move African American women with physical disabilities from “them” status to “us” status. (Haslam et al., 2011). Haslam et al. (2011) argue that “effective leadership is always about how leaders and followers come to see each other as part of a common team or group – as members of the same *in-group*” (p. xxi). They further assert to achieve that goal, leaders must affirmatively act to shape the inclusive understanding of the team.

The participants in this study chronicled their lived experiences in progressing their careers. Several shared experiences that reflected they were not fully part of the in-group because their counterparts viewed them as different. For example, Dr. Dahlia spoke about sitting in the back and receiving less robust assignments because her employers did not know how to incorporate her into the team. In addition, Ms. Tania related how her attempts to address challenges on her job were rebuffed but acted upon when persons of a different race raised the same issues.

Organizational leaders who act proactively to understand the capabilities of followers with disabilities move toward creating a pathway for differently-abled co-workers to become members of the in-group. Providing training to all levels of the organization is a vehicle for changing mindsets so that co-workers permit disabled employees entrance into the “us.” Providing accommodations that allow disabled

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employees to have optimal productivity generates opportunities to demonstrate capacity, again as a conduit for inclusion.

Mentoring programs that pair African American women with disabilities with members of the in-group or with those who have influence with the in-group can be an avenue for positive exposure to team members. This type of contact can increase interaction with in-group members and ease the admission of African American women with disabilities into membership in and relationships with teams.

### **Summary of the Dissertation in Practice**

While often used in the world of horse racing, the term trifecta refers to a group of three things, the results of which are usually desirable (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). College-educated African American women with physical disabilities represent a trifecta of social identities. These women can be a rich human resource for organizations and a population from which leaders can be shaped and promoted. This study sought to examine the experiences of a set of African American college-educated women with physical disabilities to understand their experiences and possible reasons why this population endured challenges to their career development. The study specifically sought to examine whether the intersection of race, gender, and disability played a role in career advancement. The goal of the study was to take the results to develop strategies to address barriers to career development, and to expand decision makers' understanding of the leadership potential of African American women with physical disabilities.

The study participants identified singular, combination, and sometimes shifting combinations of identities of race, gender, and disability as having an influence on their career growth. Further they discussed various supports and barriers to their career

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development. Several also identified disability as the identity that most affected their career advancement. As a result, the proposed solutions to increasing leadership opportunities for this population include: (a) training that broadens understanding of how ableist attitudes color organizational leaders' view of the capability of disabled employees; (b) providing more effective accommodations for disabled employees; and (c) developing or enhancing mentorship programs.

Implementation of these solutions requires the involvement of various stakeholders including senior leadership, human resource personnel, supervisors, co-workers, and disabled employees. Moreover, there may be resource challenges to the implementation of these solutions, both monetary and human. Some of the solutions may be immediately implemented, for example, providing certain accommodations, while others can only be attained over time, such as mindset change. All of the solutions must be evaluated to verify whether they are addressing the need of increasing leadership opportunities for African American women with disabilities. Where they are not effective in meeting that need, adjustments would be necessary.

Scholars are beginning to add disability to discussions of diversity.

Notwithstanding the addition of disability into these conversations, researchers have significant opportunities to probe further the relationship between disability, gender, race and social phenomena. Research that can unearth strategies for navigating career growth can be valuable for African American women with physical disabilities. Also, providing opportunities to share the experiences of this population can help co-workers develop a greater understanding of disabled co-workers and help reduce stigmatization that can lead to decreased leadership opportunities for disabled workers. Finally, given the

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considerable number of persons who are or may become disabled, additional research can assist organizations of all types to take advantage of the leadership talent of disabled employees and reap the full benefits, i.e., hit a trifecta, of a diverse workforce.

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**Appendices**

## RACE, GENDER, DISABILITY AND CAREER PROGRESSION

## Appendix A

## Organization Solicitation Letter

**Teresa A. Scott**

Tas14032@creighton.edu

301-873-2284

Date  
Name  
Title  
Organization  
Address

Dear Sir or Madam:

Greetings. My name is Teresa Scott. I am a doctoral candidate in the Interdisciplinary Leadership program at Creighton University. I am contacting you to seek your permission to solicit members of your organization to participate in a research study exploring the lived experiences of African American women with disabilities in advancing their careers. I am seeking your help because I recognize that members of your organization may be part of my study's population.

I am a federal government employee with over twenty years of experience in financial institution regulation. I am also an African American woman with cerebral palsy, a condition I have had since birth. Throughout my career, I have encountered supports and barriers to my career development, which I believe were premised on my race, gender, disability, or some combination of the three. I believe there is room to explore how these three identities intersect in the lives of African American women with physical disabilities to help educate decision makers about how their efforts support or restrict leadership opportunities for this population.

As the project's principal investigator, I am anticipating conducting single, 45-60 minute, individual interviews via Zoom with approximately 5-10, college-educated, African American women with physical disabilities. Study participant names and identifying information (e.g., place of employment) will remain confidential and will be removed in the reporting of the data.

I would like to formally ask you to share this letter with your membership. Members of your organization who meet the research criteria and are interested in participating in the study may reach me at the email address listed above ([tas14032@creighton.edu](mailto:tas14032@creighton.edu)). Thank you for your support of my research as I attempt to understand the experiences of African American women with physical disabilities and to develop strategies that may assist them in furthering their careers.

Sincerely,  
Teresa A. Scott, M.S.F., J.D.  
Creighton University

## Appendix B

## Study Participant Information Letter



Date:

Dear Participant:

Greetings! I trust this correspondence finds you well. I am a doctoral candidate in the Interdisciplinary Leadership program at Creighton University and am contacting you to gauge your interest in participating in a research study exploring the lived experiences of African American women with disabilities in advancing their careers.

I am a federal government employee with over twenty years of experience in financial institution regulation. I am also an African American woman with cerebral palsy, a condition I have had since birth. Throughout my career, I have encountered supports and barriers to my career development, which I believe were premised on my race, gender, disability, or some combination of the three. I believe there is room to explore how these three identities intersect in the lives of African American women with physical disabilities to help educate decision makers how their efforts support or restrict leadership opportunities for this population.

I serve as the project's principal investigator and will conduct one, 45-60 minute, individual interviews via Zoom with approximately 5-10, African American women with physical disabilities. Study participant names and identifying information (e.g. place of employment) will remain anonymous and will be removed in the reporting of the data.

I would like to formally ask for your participation. If you choose to participate, the following will provide some further information on our interaction:

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 me, the primary investigator of this study. There will be no penalty to you.

If you agree to participate in this study:

- All participants involved in the study will be over 25 years of age.
- One (1) interview visit (via Zoom) is required of each participant.
- The interview will be recorded
- There will be no compensation for the interviews.
- These interviews will last between 45-60 minutes (the block schedule will be for 90 minutes to allow for any technical set-up or issue resolution).

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- The potential benefits of participating in this study is to assist a me in the completion of my doctoral degree and contributing to new knowledge on the research topic.
- The potential risks to be in this study are minimal. Perhaps the largest risk is some emotional distress upon recalling some negative experiences. If distress surfaces during the interview, know that we can stop immediately and resume if you feel ready. Additionally, you can refuse to answer any questions for any reason and you can withdraw from the study at any time for any reason. Should you wish to talk with someone concerning matters raised during the interview, you may contact The Life Crisis Center Hotline at 410-749-4357 or dial 2-1-1.

### Confidentiality and Anonymity:

- I will do everything I can to keep your records confidential. However, it cannot be guaranteed. I may need to report certain information to agencies as required by law. I intend to take care to protect confidentiality and anonymity to include ensuring all recordings, transcripts, and dissertation drafts are stored on password protected devices; to which only I use and have access. Records that identify you may be looked at by others. The list of people who may look at your research records are:
  - My dissertation committee and support staff within the Creighton Interdisciplinary Leadership program, and
  - The Creighton University Institutional Review Board (IRB) and other internal departments that provide support and oversight at Creighton University
- 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.
- When reviewing and analyzing the data, I plan to use pseudonyms that you will be given an opportunity to choose. I will refrain from using descriptors related to your job location or other relationships that might expose your identity. Finally, when using direct quotes, I will scrub or make generic any phrases, key words, or examples that might reveal your identity.

If you are interested in being interviewed for this research project, or know another colleague who might be interested, please contact me at [Tas14032@creighton.edu](mailto:Tas14032@creighton.edu) or [Teresa.a.scott@gmail.com](mailto:Teresa.a.scott@gmail.com).

Thank you for your consideration and I look forward to hearing from you very soon.  
Sincerely,

Teresa A. Scott, M.S.F., J.D.  
Creighton University

Attachment: Creighton University Bill of Rights for Research Participants

## RACE, GENDER, DISABILITY AND CAREER PROGRESSION

**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.

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## Appendix C

## Interview Protocol

Research Project: Exploring the intersectionality of race, gender, and disability on career progression for African American woman with physical disabilities

Time of Interview: To be determined

Date: To be determined

Place: Digital Interview

Interviewer: Teresa A. Scott

Interviewee: To be determined

A. Opening Statement:

Good morning. My name is Teresa Scott, and I am a doctoral student at Creighton University. Thank you, Ms. \_\_\_\_\_ for agreeing to be interviewed in connection with a research study I am conducting. I am exploring the lived experiences of African American women with disabilities as they travel along their career paths. I plan to record our conversation today so that I can ensure I correctly capture your responses. I want to remind you your comments will remain confidential. At the end of my study, I will produce a paper that may include comments you share with me today. However, I will use pseudonyms in ascribing your comments. I want to make sure you are entirely comfortable with the plans I have for the information from our conversation today.

I truly appreciate you lending your time to my study. I expect the interview may take 45 minutes to an hour. If you need to take a break at any time, just let me know. Do you have any questions before we begin?

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## B. Questions:

1. Would you please share with me some of your background regarding education and early career? How did you get where you are and how would you describe your current career stage? What have you done during your career to increase your opportunities for career advancement?
2. What factors would you identify as being most helpful as you advanced in your career?
3. What challenges have you faced in your career?
4. Are you willing to share any painful or difficult experiences along your career path?" If they agree to share, "Can you describe what that was like for you?
5. I want you think about your race, your gender, and your disability. Describe the impact, if any, of your race, gender, disability or any combination of these three on your career growth?

Probing question: Do you think any one of the three, race, gender, or disability played a more dominant role in your career advancement. If yes, what experiences have you had that lead you to that view?

6. What has been your experience in seeking job promotions?
7. If you applied for a promotion or a higher-level position and were unsuccessful, what are your thoughts as to why you were unsuccessful?
8. What has been your experience with mentors or on-the-job coaches?

Probing questions: Did you seek out mentors? Did anyone identify you as someone they wished to mentor? What have you observed about the

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usefulness of having mentors for those whose careers you have observed or followed?

9. If there is something more you'd like to add about your experience along your career path that I have not asked, please describe that for me.

Additional probing questions for depth and breadth to the above questions:

- Would you expound on that?
- Tell me more.
- How would you describe that differently?
- I would like to hear more about that.
- Would you clarify that for me?
- What were the consequences?
- What was your reaction to that behavior?
- Take me through your thought processes during that time.

C. Closing Statement:

Thank you again for sharing your time with me during this interview. I plan to review your comments and am happy to send you a copy of my research notes to review to make sure I have appropriately captured your statements. I may also need to reach back to you to clarify some points to make sure I am accurately portraying your comments. Also, should you have any questions you want to ask me, please do not hesitate to call me at 301-873-2284 or email me at [tas14032@creighton.edu](mailto:tas14032@creighton.edu).

## RACE, GENDER, DISABILITY AND CAREER PROGRESSION

## Appendix D

## Observation Protocol

| Date:  |                  |
|--|------------------|
| Time:  |                  |
| Duration:  |                  |
| Observer: Teresa A. Scott, Ed.D. student, Creighton University |                  |
| Study Participant (anonymized):                                |                  |
| Descriptive Notes  | Reflective Notes |
|  |                  |
|  |                  |

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## Appendix E

## Theme Tables

**Table 2***The Intersection of Social Identities Effect on Career Progression*

| Participant | Coded Segments  |
|-------------|---|
| Dr. Willa   | So that's the unfortunate thing about living at the painful intersection of race and gender and disability discrimination, because you never know which ones operating. And that's why it's such a stressful being black, disabled woman. It's stressful, because you're always on guard.             |
| Dr. Dahlia  | And then when we showed up to the table, all our identities it was quite surprising. So, in some cases, I can recall where they thought they were doing it to help the poor, the poor old black, deaf girl in the workplace. "Let's give her a chance, something we don't want to do, let her do it." |

**Table 3***Sub-Themes of The Intersection of Social Identities Effect on Career Progression*

| Theme           | Participant | Coded Segments   |
|-----------------|-------------|--|
| Race and Gender | Mrs. Bisa   | I often had to travel with white men who weren't used to dealing with a professional woman, black woman anyway, professional woman period at that. So and I was very young. I was 22. So, it was interesting. That was an interesting time, but I got through it.    |
|                 | Ms. Tania   | I push back on people when they try to push things on me, and I think some upper management people don't like that style. If you speak up for yourself, it's also being labeled as the angry black woman, when other people get described as passionate and spirited |
|                 | Dr. Willa   | Now, I'm being very much engrossed now in about the self- efficacy of my own self if you will, like how am I navigating the world? How am I getting jobs and not getting jobs and what racism, what racism is playing  |

---

|                              |            |   |
|------------------------------|------------|---|
|                              |            | <p>into this and how my genders playing into this. I'm getting a little more awareness.</p> <p>Our race is forefront, so as a black woman, that's what I show up as. I show up as a black woman first.</p>  |
|                              | Ms. Ayanna | <p>When it comes to my race or gender, it seems to be I get put in a box because that's the first thing people immediately see. When that's the first thing you see about a person that does present that unique challenge of having to see beyond that. Yes, I'm a black woman but I also love comic books.</p> <p>So yes, it presented that unique challenge in the sense that when they see a black woman, then I all of a sudden become the spokesperson for every quote unquote black topic that is going on out there.</p>  |
| Race and Disability          | Dr. Dahlia | <p>And so people that didn't look like us or else they looked like me did not appreciate this. So who is this deaf woman that's coming in with all this energy, that's advocating, telling us that we need to be more inclusive and that we need to cater our services to fit all people, too much power for that deaf woman to have.</p>   |
|                              | Ms. Tania  | <p>I think that race and disability are greater than gender. I don't feel ... because when I think about colleagues who are also women, that's not it. It's race and it's a visible disability, because I use a wheelchair, and that's visibly seen.</p>  |
| Race, Gender, and Disability | Dr. Willa  | <p>I show up as a black woman first, my disability is a character trait, and it doesn't really get much attention until it is a problem.</p> <p>insidious thing about triple jeopardy, or living out the trifecta of discrimination, if you will, is that you never know which one is operating, you never know which one is operating. You don't know if you didn't get the job, because you're black. You don't know if you didn't get the job because you're a woman. And you certainly would not know if you got the job because you were the person with a disability.</p> |

---

So they interact, they interlap, they intersect and they all equally have the same impact, but you never know which one is more impactful.

Dr. Dahlia

But I do see how women of color, deaf women of color have been overlooked just because of the color of our skin, just because when we walk in the room, and they see our us and all of our femaleness, and I'm not sure if every time it's because they don't want to give us the opportunity. I think it's fear.

So, with my education and everything on paper, it was great. I was accepted into so many different things that offered scholarships and amazing opportunities. My experience afforded me on paper, but when I walked into the room, it was a different story.

I think that in some cases, people said, "Oh, poor little deaf girl, poor little black girl, let me give her a chance." And then when we showed up to the table, all our identities it was quite surprising. So in some cases, I can recall where they thought they were doing it to help the poor, the poor old black, deaf girl in the workplace. "Let's give her a chance, something we don't want to do, let her do it."

Ms. Kala

Being a black woman with a disability, particularly in America presents unique challenges and opportunities

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**Table 4***The Impact of Disability on Career Advancement*

| Participant | Coded Segments   |
|-------------|--|
| Dr. Willa   | You got a lot of people not really embracing who you were, because they were so focused on who you were not. I guess they couldn't embrace or embody the idea that you have a disability and you're really capable now, versus looking at you and thinking because you have a disability, you're not capable. So you're fighting that all the time.  |
| Dr. Dahlia  | Those were some challenges of being denied some services or opportunities because people were thinking how they were going to handle it as opposed to how I could produce.   |
| Mrs. Kala   | <p>That comes with the anxiety of living with a disability, for fear that somebody is going to mind that opportunity, if you're not willing to prove yourself three, four or five times above the next person.</p> <p>With regards to my disability, at that point I had taken on the profile of telling people I was living with multiple sclerosis after I got in the position because once I'm there, you're going to fall in love with me and you're not going to lose me in that job so it was a safer place for me to be.</p>                                  |
| Miss Ayanna | <p>After 2017 was such a trying year for me emotionally, physically because my classroom wasn't, it was on the third floor, no elevator. After years that puts a wear and tear on your body, especially when you're dealing with something like cerebral palsy that's such a physical and demanding disability.</p> <p>I prove myself just like anybody else already by getting the degrees I needed or certifications that I needed. That should be have been enough. I was just like, it's not fair and I'm not doing it to myself anymore. So I stepped away.</p> |
| Miss Tania  | I really stopped traveling. My last plane flight was in 2015, and so I haven't traveled by plane since. I try to go up and down the Eastern Seaboard, because I'm either able to take the Auto Train or the Megabus, but I feel like disability has stunted my ability to really promote my work as much as I want to, which then cuts into my sales.  |

RACE, GENDER, DISABILITY AND CAREER PROGRESSION

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Mrs. Ledesi

I would honestly have to say that my years there were good years. I didn't have a problem there at all until I did have a problem. And that problem was kind of my inside problem because I wasn't even aware that I had a problem for a good portion of it.

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## RACE, GENDER, DISABILITY AND CAREER PROGRESSION

**Table 5***Sub Themes of The Impact of Disability on Career Advancement*

| Sub Theme                          | Participant | Coded Segment   |
|------------------------------------|-------------|---|
| Disability as the Salient Identity | Ms. Gamila  | So, there were a lot of things that my disability affected that were just basic things. So, there was no going out to eat. There was no impromptu speeches, things like that. And a lot of things that were so tied into my profession that I did every day. My travel schedule was probably 75% because a lot of what I did was talking to our players, doing face-to-face meetings, doing presentations. And so there was a period where I remember, I stayed home from the office because I did not want to go to work and have anyone look at me the way that I looked. |
|                                    | Mrs. Bisa   | Q: And so, thinking about your race, your gender, and your disability, can you describe any impact that you think that one, or all three of those or some combination of those may have had on your career growth?<br>A: I think it has significant impact early in my career with my current organization.<br>Q: Let me stop you for one second, when you say it, what's it?<br>A: Multiple sclerosis  |
|                                    | Dr. Dahlia  | Those were some challenges of being denied some services or opportunities because people were thinking how they were going to handle it as opposed to how I could produce.<br><br>In those situations, they terminate the services because of their discomfort, as opposed to waiting to see, "Oh, I happened to be a deaf person that is unique.   |
|                                    | Ms. Ayanna  | I was often questioned could you do this job? Not because educational wise, but because I have a physical disability which is cerebral palsy. Because I walk different, it was like well can you do it? I mean, I was even questioned in  |

the interview like if you had a child that ran what would you do?

I can say during those 10 years I never ... I met people who had disabilities but they weren't ... It maybe was something that came within the time that they've been teachers, but they didn't have disability needs when they first started. But I never met someone like myself who is coming into the classroom as a person with a disability and having to advocate for the things that she would need to be a successful educator.

Mrs. Ledesi

It was definitely my disability. The fact that I couldn't do the work, like I know I should have been able to do the work and nobody was trying to find a spot for me, find a space for me to still be able to work, was very painful for me. The fact that I felt like I had to stop working because I wasn't capable of doing the job that I was hired to do. And I felt like I could still work and be productive, but they didn't seem to have a spot for me to do that, or try to make a spot for me.

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## RACE, GENDER, DISABILITY AND CAREER PROGRESSION

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|------------------------------|------------|---|
|                              | Dr. Willa  | Whether it's So you're fighting that all the time. And then the perceptions of when you walk into a room. I mean, as a woman who walks with a limp, walks with a cane, you're always on display. And you're always, in a way having to explain it, a way. We live disability every day.   |
| The Perception of Disability | Dr. Willa  | There's a hierarchy, if you will, in disability, and within a disability community where it's not really talked about, but there is. Who's more disabled than the next person, right? I'm not as disabled as you so therefore I'm a little better than you, if you will.  |
|                              | Dr. Dahlia | I will say that in the deaf community, there's something known as the capital DEAF which suggests that that deaf person is deaf, that's immersed fully, and the deaf community that they depend on sign language to communicate. And that's it. Culturally, everything is the deaf community. So persons outside of that have been demoted, if you will, to a lowercase deaf. Now on the spectrum, we may not be able to hear just like anybody else, but if we choose, like right now, I'm assimilating with you without an interpreter, and I'm using my voice, so I've already been demoted. So they've already discriminated against me in that way. So, for the deaf community, I'm not deaf enough. |
|                              | Ms. Tania  | There are other people who also have issues when their disability is not seen where they may not be taken as seriously. It can be just as hard for them because nobody believes they have a disability because they can't see it.   |
| Loss of Dream or Job         | Ms. Ayanna | I was like, I can't, although I love the children and I love what I do, I can no longer keep putting my body through basically torture because I feel like I have to prove myself to people.  |
|                              | Dr. Willa  | And my interest was pre-disability pre-amputation. So my quest for higher education was motivated by me wanting to be an actress  |

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|--------------------------------|-------------|--|
|                                |             | and be a performer. So that was 1974 when I started undergraduate school, and in 1976 everything shifted in terms of to the trajectory of what my interests would now be forced to be and I wouldn't say forced to be but what's the word? Sort of redirected, based on the fact that now I am a person with a disability.   |
|                                | Dr. Dahlia  | Disappointed that I wasn't encouraged or empowered to move forward, to become an astronaut that I decided to pursue a more people-oriented concepts.   |
|                                |             | I really wanted to plant my feet because I really wanted to be an astronaut. That was something that I was always aspiring for.  |
| Emotional Impact of Disability | Ms. Gamila  | It really, really, really affected me emotionally. My disability also, and it's been so long now that I can't remember the exact timeframe, it's a disability where I went through stages in the severity of my recovery or where I was on the recovery phase as far as treatment.   |
|                                |             | I had to find my own cadence to get back into family gatherings and try and be a happy person and not be a sad person. And that was a lot harder than just being like a hermit. And so, I think the emotional part and the basically driving yourself, is just as important sometime, I think, in getting emotionally where you need to be, regardless of what you look like physically. |
|                                | Mrs. Bisa   | When I was first diagnosed with multiple sclerosis, I didn't want people to know. I didn't want to get handicap tags. I didn't want to use a cane. I didn't want to talk about it.   |
|                                | Mrs. Ledesi | And I couldn't put my finger on it. It was then, and the problem was kind of more with me, but then I was emotional once I felt I couldn't work. I felt I couldn't work and I was out on an island by myself.  |

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RACE, GENDER, DISABILITY AND CAREER PROGRESSION

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- Ms. Tania      The hard part and the depressing part for me has been not being able to travel as much as I want to promote the book.
- Dr. Willa      So emotionally of course, and you never in that journey of the emotional relationship you have with your disability, because society doesn't allow you to forget it
- Ms. Ayanna      .  
But I didn't really speak on it because I'm like no I can do this, and I just continued to push myself because I didn't want other people to feel like they had to pick up what I was lacking because of my disability if that kind of makes sense so I just pushed myself.
- but I didn't really speak on it because I'm like no I can do this, and I just continued to push myself because I didn't want other people to feel like they had to pick up what I was lacking because of my disability if that kind of makes sense so I just pushed myself.
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## RACE, GENDER, DISABILITY AND CAREER PROGRESSION

**Table 6***Sub-Themes for: Intersecting Identities Effect on Career Barriers and Supports*

| Sub Theme      | Participant | Coded Segments  |
|----------------|-------------|---|
| Accommodations | Mrs. Ledesi | <p>Q: So did you specifically ask for an accommodation that you were not granted?</p> <p>Interviewee:</p> <p>A: Yes. Because I told them, I would work as a nursing assistant, but I wanted to be paid because I believe they know I would have been a good nurse and I wanted to be paid my salary, which might not have been a realistic, but I want it to be paid my salary and keep coming to work and do the job that most people don't want to do.</p>  |
|                | Mrs. Bisa   | <p>I was eventually able to go back to work and they did accommodate me to allow me to do something that didn't require a whole lot of reading or writing.</p> <p>My boss decided I should no longer travel ever. And I had to let him know that that wasn't necessary. I didn't ask for that accommodation and that wasn't necessary that I would know, by that time I was walking again, I could walk again, and whether I was walking normally or using a cane or whatever the situation was, I should not have been prevented from traveling because of the MS.</p> <p>And after I recovered from that I had a conversation with my director about working from home when I felt as though I needed to do so and so that I could maintain my productivity. And he just said, no. I fought back.</p> |
|                | Ms. Tania   | <p>I'm happy to be working from home is an understatement. I am ecstatic, because I have everything I need and I can be comfortable,</p>  |

but also the thing that annoyed me is how supervisors and executive directors power tripped when people with disabilities asked to work from home and you're denied, and now all of a sudden you have to work from home, and no, it's fine. We'll get you a computer, and we'll get you a cell phone, and we'll pay for some of your internet access.

Dr. Willa

I mean, one of the things that, if you provide all of the, I think this one researcher said, "Give people what they need and they will perform." So if you give me everything I need, I'm going to do the work. But if you give me a half of I guess of an accommodation, if you will.

So that means that a half an accommodation looks like something like for me, like I can get to work and I have an elevator to get access to a higher level floor, but on inclement days, I really don't do very well. And so if I could work from home and not have to plead with medical documentation and all of this justification as to why working from home would help me to be able to do my work.

Ms. Ayanna

The accessible bathroom was on the first floor, not on the floor with the students so I would have to go downstairs to the accessible restroom.

But once I got into wanting to advance my career and move to other schools where there is no elevator and my school, my classroom sorry, is on the third floor with no elevator. The school the interest of the school, it wasn't pristine to have a railing on the front of the school so me asking for that to be put in place was a problem.

I did work at one school for a year, it was middle school. This particular school the staff was very, very, very supportive. The school was ADA compliant, they had elevators that I

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|         |            |   |
|---------|------------|---|
|         |            | <p>could use. If I needed help in my classroom my team would come in and help me.</p> <p>I think if more an option to have an aide for the teacher herself, where a lot of physical things could be taken off of the teacher whether it be male or female. I feel like education would be broadened so much more.</p> <p>Because disabled persons have been denied so much, they are "catching up," and need greater levels of accommodations.</p> <p>I can remember one of the schools I worked with, the one with the railing, the principal was so excited. One year she told me, this was after three years of working there, Miss Young, we finally got a railing put on by the steps. I go out and look out the front door and I'm like where? It was on the back end of the school, not the front.</p> |
|         | Dr. Dahlia | <p>So I sat in a corner way in the back, back way in the back, disconnected from everyone. They didn't have the technology back then to communicate and include me into meetings and to include me into awesome research.</p> <p>Before ADA, Americans Disabilities Act . . . So this was before then. So they tried to be as accommodating as possible as they could with the times.</p>   |
| Mentors | Mrs. Bisa  | <p>Relationship building is always very important. I've not really had mentors, but I've had relationships with people above and below me that were always very helpful.</p>  |
|         | Dr. Dahlia | <p>I would say yes because I established a relationship with another company with a gentleman who was doing the same types of things that I was doing in terms of providing services. And I would say that he, God bless his soul, was a mentor. We did not, at the time of our meeting, we worked for two different</p>  |

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agencies, but we put our companies together at one point before his demise, and we had a company together. And in that, he was probably in my career, probably a mentor to empower me to take it up a notch and to incorporate some skills that I didn't know that I had. And I did the same for him, but I could say that he probably was a mentor.

No, there was no other deaf woman, black female, doing what I was doing. At that time, there were no other black deaf professionals seeking to start their own businesses. So I didn't have that in a lot of areas. I was the first one. Yeah, he was a professional colleague that, I would say without a doubt, was probably a major mentor for me.

Mrs. Kala

I have had some amazing mentors and some amazing peer mentors that I still have to this day. I keep my peer mentors close. We actually meet once a week. We call ourselves the black female disable round table and we are there to help bounce ideas off of each other, share resources. We can't read everything, we can't catch it all and to look for opportunities and angles that one may not be able to see. I think mentors are essential.

Dr. Willa

There weren't many people reaching out helping you to navigate this landscape of being a black disabled woman. Why? Because many people didn't know it themselves.

Ms. Tania

Q: Throughout your career, currently where you are now and even some of your previous ... even your internships. Did you have any experiences with mentors or on the job coaches?

A: Not really. I do read things. In the last five years, I've had one really good group of women that I started meeting with, and I wish I had of met them years ago. They all have

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disabilities and they're all black women, and we just get together on Zoom. We used to go out before COVID and have dinner, and just commiserate. It was kind of a bitch session about different things, and an opportunity to laugh and share, and I feel like one of them has been an extremely good mentor about moving ahead, and all four of them were ...women with disabilities and women of color.

Ms. Gamila

Mentors brought immense value and help shape me. They also pushed outside comfort zone.

Ms. Ayanna

I honestly didn't know that was an option. I think if I knew it now looking back, if I knew that that was an option I probably would have taken it. But it was never something that was presented to me so I wasn't aware that it was an option.

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Appendix F

## RACE, GENDER, DISABILITY AND CAREER PROGRESSION

# Creighton

## UNIVERSITY

### Office of the Provost

Research Compliance

DETERMINATION DATE: June 28, 2021

TO: Teresa Scott

FROM: Social Behavioral IRB

PROJECT TITLE: Intersection of Race, Gender, and Disability on Careers of African American Women with Disabilities

REVIEW CATEGORY: Expedited

RISK LEVEL: Minimal

SUBMISSION #: 2002103-01

SUBMISSION TYPE: Initial Application

REVIEW METHOD: Expedited

DETERMINATION: Approved

EXPIRATION DATE: 26-Jun-2022

Thank you for your response to IRB requests for this project. The following items were reviewed in this submission:

- Creighton University HS eForm
  - Study Protocol
  - Organization Solicitation Letter
  - Prescreen Questionnaire with revisions
  - Participant Letter with revisions
  - Data Collection Sheet
  - Interview Protocol
  - Observation Protocol

The changes to the participant letter and the prescreen questionnaire satisfy the concerns of the Board as expressed in the IRB letter dated June 27, 2021. Therefore, this project is fully approved. This approval is based on an appropriate risk/benefit ratio and a project design wherein the risks have been minimized. All research must be conducted in accordance with this approved submission.

Documentation of consent has been waived since the research presents no more than minimal risk of harm to participants and involves no procedures for which written consent is normally required outside of the research context. (45 CFR 46.117(c)(ii)).

1. Please remember that informed consent is a process beginning with a description of the project and insurance of participant understanding. The information letter must be given to all participants.

#### Institutional Review Board

☎ 402.280.2126 | ☎ 402.280.3200  
 Dr. C.C. and Mabel L. Criss Health Sciences Complex I  
 2500 California Plaza Omaha, NE 68178

[creighton.edu](http://creighton.edu)  
[creighton.edu/researchservices/rcocommittees/irb](http://creighton.edu/researchservices/rcocommittees/irb)

# Creighton UNIVERSITY

## Office of the Provost

Research Compliance

2. Please note that any revision to previously approved materials must be approved by this committee prior to initiation. Please use the 'Request for Modification' form for this procedure. You must track all changes in the documents affected by the Modification so that the Board can appropriately review and approve the submission.
3. All UNANTICIPATED PROBLEMS involving risks to subjects or others (UPIRSOs) and SERIOUS and UNEXPECTED adverse events must be reported promptly to this office. All NON-COMPLIANCE issues or COMPLAINTS regarding this project must be reported promptly to this office. Please use the Reporting Form for Reportable New Information for this procedure. All FDA and sponsor reporting requirements must also be followed.
4. Advertisements, letters, internet postings, any other media for subject recruitment, and information given to subjects for use in this study require approval before posting or distribution. Please use the "Request for Modification" form when requesting review for supplemental documents.
5. This project has been determined to be a minimal risk project. Please use the Annual, Continuing, or Project Termination form for this procedure. Your documentation for continuing review must be received with sufficient time for review and continued approval before the expiration date. If you complete this project within the year, you are required to close the study and submit a final report prior to the expiration date.

If you have any questions, please contact the IRB Office at 402-280-2126 or [irb@creighton.edu](mailto:irb@creighton.edu). Please include your project title and reference number in all correspondence with this Board.

This letter has been electronically signed in accordance with all applicable regulations, and a copy is retained within Creighton University IRB records.

### Institutional Review Board

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