

The Phenomenological Study About the Lived Experiences of Black Women Pursing Managerial Positions in Corporate America

Edo Branch

**Karina Kasztelnik
Tennessee State University**

The purpose of this qualitative, descriptive phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of Black women advancing into management positions who faced more gender and racial biases than their White male and female counterparts in corporate America. The study aimed to gain insight into how Black women perceive gender and racial biases in comparison to their White male and female counterparts. The participants selected for individual interviews were asked open-ended questions related to their experiences while advancing in corporate America. By understanding their lived experiences through their perceptions of gender and racial biases, additional elements may manifest themes related to this phenomenon. The study provided information for Black women to learn about and practice their perseverance strategies to ascend into managerial roles. While Black women compete with Black men, White women, and White men, they may need to adopt a direct understanding, based on their lived experiences, to find personal meaning to their unique position within society. The study's outcome addresses the challenges, barriers, and perseverance strategies Black women used to ascend into management roles.

Keywords: challenges, barriers, underrepresentation, Black women, sustainable world, live experience, business management

INTRODUCTION

The study provided Black women with data that would allow Black women to learn about and practice the perseverance strategies that may help them to ascend into managerial roles. The participants of the study were Black women managers. The research study may be significant to Black women managers and future leaders. Further exploration of specific perseverance strategies and how they may have been demonstrated in their collegiate programs to prepare Black women for their professional careers. I would also recommend a more in-depth study to understand how Black girls are groomed and empowered to become confident and persistent in their professional journey. Using the reflections of Black women's lived experiences, the participants in the study may find a spark of motivation, encouragement, and confidence to challenge themselves to become more visible and bring more value within their corporate environments (Dickens et al., 2018; McCluney & Rabelo, 2019). Black women managers within corporate America used perseverance strategies to ascend into managerial roles. The study's findings provided a pivotal change to the cultural narrative for Black women managers in corporate America.

The research may also be significant to scholars, as the research addressed the gap in the literature relating to Black women being confronted more with systemic gender and racial biases, which impeded their pursuit of management roles in corporate America (Alter, 2017; Bui, 2019; Gee & Peck, 2018; Loutfi, 2019; McFeeters, 2019; Washington & Roberts, 2019). The study's outcome addresses the challenges, barriers, and perseverance strategies Black women used to ascend into management roles.

The influence of race and traditional privileged gendered roles continues to infiltrate most aspects of the work environment, with little progress in attaining management roles for Black women (Gee & Peck, 2018; Loutfi, 2019; McFeeters, 2019). In corporate America, Black women remain the highest demographics that are underrepresented in management roles (Beckwith et al., 2016; Bui, 2019; Roberts et al., 2018). Bui (2019) posited that persistent management underrepresentation is due to gender and racial bias, not education, experience, or skillset. Despite the underrepresentation and gender and racial biases, Black women continuously pursue management roles in the workplace (Dickens et al., 2018; McCluney & Rabelo, 2019).

The general problem was that Black women often face more gender and racial biases while advancing into management positions (Alter, 2017; Gee & Peck, 2018; Loutfi, 2019; McFeeters, 2019). The specific problem was that Black women often face more gender and racial biases while advancing into management positions in corporate America than their White male and female counterparts (Alter, 2017; Bui, 2019; Gee & Peck, 2018; Loutfi, 2019; McFeeters, 2019; Washington & Roberts, 2019).

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The conceptual framework that grounded this study was the intersectionality of gender and race as it relates to the underrepresentation of Black women managers in corporate America. The theory of intersectionality of gender and race lends to the perspective that the intersections of many inequalities are centralized (Cole 2009; Collins 2000, Crenshaw 1989; King 1988; May 2015; Weber 2010). Because the intersectionality of gender and race addresses the relationship between the two institutions and how they both influence one another, Essed's concepts have been used widely in studies related to discrimination of gender and race, it has been used more with topics specifically related to the Black woman's plight in various settings such as work, home, health, and society.

The intersectionality of gender and race adds additional hardship to pursuing managerial roles for Black women in the workplace (Carastathis, 2016). Concepts explored include the types of strategies that Black women use for motivation and perseverance as they pursue managerial roles in corporate America. The approach provides a structural view of how the strategies are related to perseverance and reducing the impact of gender and racial biases. The purpose of this qualitative study using an exploratory research design was to gain an abysmal understanding of the journey of Black women managers in corporate America. The findings of this research aimed to advance the knowledge on the intersectionality of gender and race and perseverance as it relates to the grit and passion for long-term goals regardless of any initial failures or adversity (Duckworth & Quinn, 2009) and to contribute to the original qualitative data to this study's conceptual framework. Further research and application of the strategies Black women use to persevere may offer ways Black women can navigate the work environment while pursuing managerial roles in corporate America.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

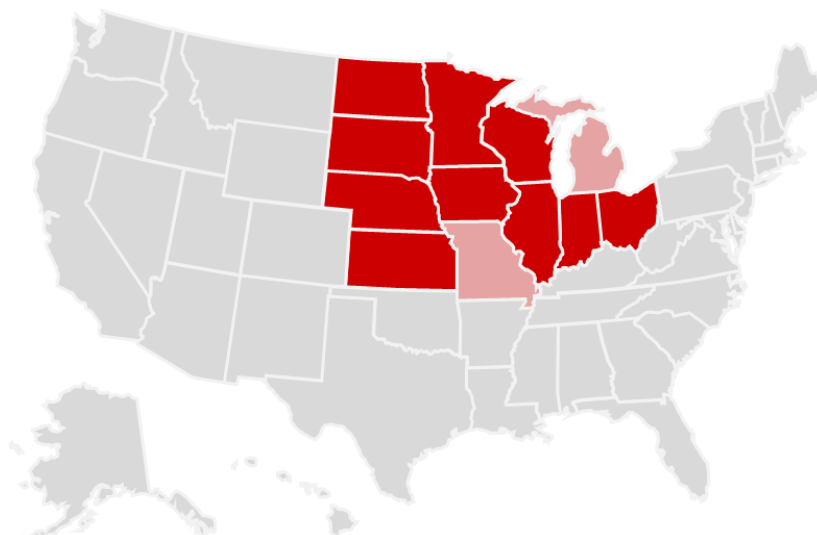
What are the lived experiences of Black women advancing into management positions regarding gender and racial biases compared to White male and female counterparts in corporate America?

DEMOGRAPHICS

All 10 participants in the study self-identified as Black and female. Ten participants worked as managers for a minimum of 5 plus years in their professional careers before the study. The researcher

conducted the study in Missouri. Participants lived or worked in the Midwestern regions (Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, Ohio, South Dakota, and Wisconsin) to meet the study eligibility. The two states the 10 final participants were representatives of were Missouri and Michigan. See Figure 1. All participants lived in the state in which they worked. One participant had no degree, one participant had only a bachelor’s degree, six participants had a bachelor’s and master’s degree, and two participants had bachelor’s, master’s, and doctorate degrees. All participants held management titles as managers at some point in their careers.

FIGURE 1
STATES WITHIN THE MIDWESTERN REGIONS



Source: Compiled by Authors. States Within the Midwestern Regions

All 10 participants held managerial-level roles throughout their careers, and nine participants currently hold executive-level roles like director, vice president, and senior vice president. Participants had an average age of 50 and an average of 16 years of managerial experience. The marital statuses of the participants ranged from single (3), separated (1), divorced (2), and married (4), and five of the participants had children. Table 1 shows a display of the participant demographic data.

TABLE 1
PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHIC DATA

	Means	Percentage
Average age of participants	50.3	-
Total years of management experience	16.6	-
Level of college/university education (none, bachelor, masters, doctorate):		
<i>None</i>	-	10%
<i>Bachelors</i>	-	10%
<i>Bachelor’s & masters</i>	-	60%
<i>Doctorate</i>	-	20%

	Means	Percentage
Marital status (married, divorced, separated, single):		
<i>Married</i>	-	40%
<i>Divorced</i>	-	20%
<i>Separated</i>	-	10%
<i>Single</i>	-	30%
Parent (Y/N):	-	50% Y
	-	50% N

Source: Compiled by Authors.

DATA ANALYSIS

Data analysis for this qualitative, descriptive phenomenology study began with hand-coding each interview transcript. I coded the data while considering the research question about Black women advancing into management positions regarding gender and racial biases compared to White male and female counterparts. For the study, Saldaña's (2016) thematic analysis was employed. We read the transcripts several times to immerse myself in the data (Moustakas, 1994). During the initial data analysis process, we created a Word document and created codes from the jotted notes We took during the interview process for each participant and placed them under three categories (Saldaña, 2016). Then, we attempted to describe each without adding the interview question or participants' responses. Unfortunately, my Word document coding method did not allow me to organize the data in a usable format effectively. We abandoned the Word document and began using QSR NVivo coding.

We used QSR NVivo 20 to remain consistent with the descriptive phenomenology research design. The transcripts were organized in a digestible manner for QSR NVivo 20 by using the Style feature in a Word document and making the question headers followed by the participants' responses. The transcripts were uploaded into QSR NVivo 20 software program, which helped manage and organize the transcript data. Once this process was complete, we reviewed the interview transcripts again in their entirety for each interview. Using QSR NVivo 20, codes were created for each new emerging element or pattern.

MEMBER CHECKING PROCESS

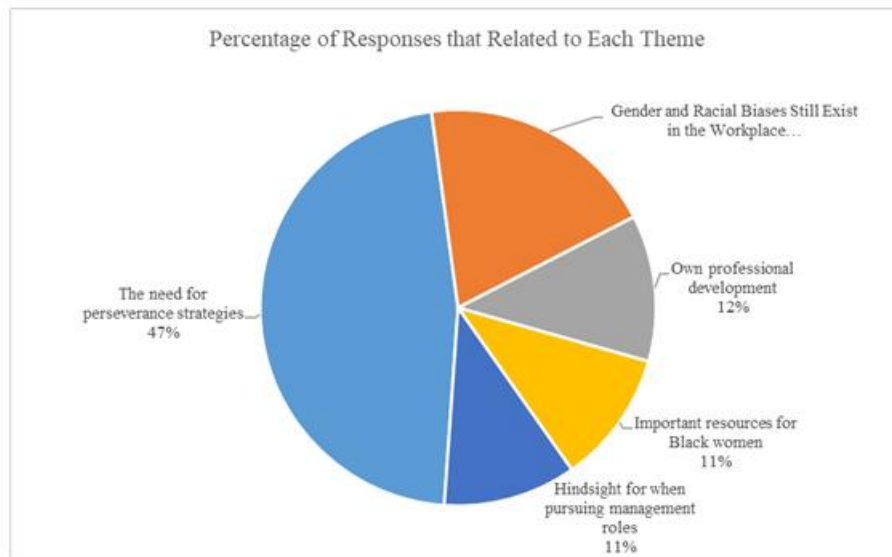
After the hand-coding and analysis of each participant interview, we created a member check document for each participant. Participants were invited via email to participate voluntarily in the member-checking stage of data analysis. The participants were given a copy of the transcript and asked to review it for accuracy. The participants were also asked to set up a follow-up interview, with prolonged contact of 5 to 45 days, to provide any feedback on anything that may have been missed during the interview process. According to Maxwell (2013), including prolonged contact with participants, allows the opportunity to ensure data integrity and validity which strengthens data trustworthiness, and reduces the high risk of bias. Participants were notified that their participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time without any negative consequences. The participants were informed that their participation would help ensure the accuracy and credibility of the study. Although there were no errors identified during the interview process, two participants offered additional thoughts after reviewing their transcripts. Participants had no further input and verified the accuracy of the transcripts during the follow-up calls.

THEMES GENERATED

After creating the codes in QSR NVivo 20, We synthesized the codes into emerging themes and subthemes. We check the codes against my research question concerning Black women advancing into management positions regarding gender and racial biases compared to White male and female counterparts. According to van Manen, themes that researchers seek to obtain are not objects or generalizations but are meaningful knots in a web that have been spun as one life to experience them and how things give themselves to us (van Manen, 2017). Staying true to the descriptive phenomenology design, we allowed participants to lead us to a source of meaning and existence in the world as it was experienced (Moustakas, 1994). During the analysis, we revisited the data multiple times to ensure the accuracy of the emerging themes. I considered the research question and developed themes that would fit into the underrepresentation of Black women in management. For example, the category, gender, and racial bias contain a code for gender and racial biases in the workplace and impede the ability of Black women to advance in the workplace. The research study was about Black women advancing into management positions who may have experienced more gender and racial biases compared to White male and female counterparts; however, many aspects in the journey of Black women navigating the workplace applies to the ability to advance into managerial roles. Thus, the code was included within the category.

We then generated five themes from the data by reviewing the connections within the category. The five themes that emerged from the study were (a) *Gender and racial biases in the workplace*, (b) *The Need for Perseverance Strategies*, (c) *Own Professional Development*, (d) *Important Resources for Black women*, and (e) *Hindsight for when pursuing management roles*. Seven corresponding subthemes further explained the phenomenon of the study. The percentage of responses related to each theme can be seen in Figure 2.

FIGURE 2
PERCENTAGE OF RESPONSES THAT RELATED TO EACH THEME



Source: Compiled by Authors.

The subtheme that pertains to the obstacles hindering the advancement of Black women in the workplace is a part of the overarching theme of the persistence of *gender and racial biases in the workplace*. Some of the results within this subtheme were specific to being Black and female while advancing in the workplace and were essential parts of the lived experiences of Black women navigating the workplace. The subthemes *perseverance strategies that worked*, *perseverance for growth*, *perseverance strategies for successful managers*, and *perseverance strategies beyond management roles* were within the main theme

of *the need for perseverance strategies*. The subthemes' *access to resources* and *managerial support* was specific to *own professional development*. The assigned names of each subtheme were derived from the interview questions used during the interview process as well as the responses from participants. The results from these themes were specific to the lived experiences of the participants as they navigated the workspace for professional growth.

STUDY RESULTS

This study addressed a gap in the literature and helped identify themes related to how Black women can effectively navigate the workplace. The purpose of this qualitative, descriptive phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of Black women advancing into management positions who faced more gender and racial biases than their White male and female counterparts in corporate America. The research question for the study was: What are the lived experiences of Black women advancing into management positions regarding gender and racial biases compared to White male and female counterparts in corporate America? Following a thorough analysis of interviews for the 10 Black women managers, five main themes emerged from the data in response to the research question that captured the descriptive experience of the journey of Black women advancing into management roles in corporate America. The five themes that emerged from the study were (a) *Gender and racial biases in the workplace*, (b) *The Need for Perseverance Strategies*, (c) *Own Professional Development*, (d) *Important Resources for Black women*, and (e) *Hindsight for when pursuing management roles*.

The description of the themes was as follows:

1. **Gender and racial biases in the workplace** - refers to the various ways Black women may experience bias, and discrimination based on gender and race. hooks (1987) argued that Black women are subject to oppressive forces due to the intersectionality of gender and race. hooks (1987) also noted that societal racism directly devaluates Black womanhood. In the study, participants' narratives contained several accounts explaining how their progression in the workplace was impacted by gender and racial biases throughout their careers. Participants described their level of expertise, educational attainments, qualifications, and challenges as Black women in a climate that has not resolved gender and racial biases.
2. **The Need for Perseverance Strategies** - refers to the importance of resilience and persistence in facing challenges, barriers, and the underrepresentation of Black women. In the study, perseverance is referred to as "grit"; it refers to the continued pursuit of goals, despite any adversity that may hinder progress. The participants shared strategies they used to intentionally cultivate the reality that allowed them to persevere and remain steadfast in the face of various barriers and challenges to help them with professional growth.
3. **Own Professional Development** - refers to the importance of Black women taking ownership of their career paths and actively seeking professional growth and advancement opportunities. According to Horak et al. (2020), Black women place greater value on achieving career success through their efforts rather than relying on informal networks to help them advance. In the study, all participants had to own their professional growth. Participants in the study recalled joining leadership development cohorts and professional women's organizations. They also recalled paying for their training for progression.
4. **Important Resources for Black women** - refers to various resources and support systems that benefit Black women in the workplace. Knorr (2005) stated that mentoring can be an effective way to promote career development and address the inequalities that Black women often encounter in their professional journeys. There was consistency within the study where participants stated coaching, mentorship, sponsors, and having a support network were all beneficial.
5. **Hindsight when pursuing management roles** - refers to the lessons and insights Black women learned as they navigated the challenges of advancing. If having to take on the

managerial journey again, all participants shared hindsight about how they would have approached their careers.

THEME 1: GENDER AND RACIAL BIASES IN THE WORKPLACE

The first emerging theme identified during the data analysis was *gender and racial workplace biases* that perpetuate cultural underrepresentation. Participants' narratives contained several accounts explaining how their progression in the workplace was impacted by gender and racial biases throughout their careers. When interpreting the experience of being Black and female while ascending into managerial roles, the pattern of devaluing experiences and qualifications of Black women included data coded as education and qualifications, experiences, and black were significant for participants' experience of being Black and female while ascending into management. The experience of being Black and female while advancing into managerial roles revealed that systemic gender and racial biases still impact the ability of Black women to ascend into managerial roles. For example, Participant 6 shared an experience, "they automatically assume you have fewer qualifications, or you have more qualifications than they do. And they're threatened by that. It definitely has. For instance, people have told me, "Oh, you're overqualified, and so we're not sure if you're going to stay that long." And that has definitely been said to me when going from different managerial roles." Participant 7 shared a similar experience, "I've been told that I'm not qualified, even though my resume and my body of work would show otherwise."

Participants described their gender and racial biases as having their professional growth hindered. Black women having the qualifications had no bearing on whether they would be considered for managerial roles. Although Black women take the time out to get educated, get the experience, or the training, gender and racial biases impede their ability to move forward. The participants in this study recount having to work ten times harder before and still not getting promotions.

THEME 2: THE NEED FOR PERSEVERANCE STRATEGIES

Participants in this study used perseverance strategies to overcome systemic barriers and discrimination in their careers. The need for these strategies arises from the persistence of structural inequalities that continue limiting the opportunities and prospects of underrepresented groups, such as Black women, in the workforce. In this context, resilience and persistence are essential qualities that enabled the participants in this to confront and overcome the challenges of gender and racial biases. This theme highlights the importance of investigating the specific perseverance strategies that Black women could use to navigate these challenges and succeed in their careers. With several accounts of understanding their blackness, participants shared that perseverance strategies were necessary at every point in their careers. In the study, perseverance is referred to as "grit"; it refers to the continued pursuit of goals, despite any adversity that may hinder progress. The participants shared strategies they used to intentionally cultivate the reality that allowed them to persevere and remain steadfast in the face of various barriers and challenges to help them with professional growth. In the study, participants described their need for perseverance strategies.

Participants described perseverance strategies that guided their growth in the workplace. Some participants thought being surrounded by like-minded women who look similar, inserting self, and evaluating where you are and want to be, were significant for growth. Some participants also aligned out looking outside the organization for additional growth training. For example, Participant 2 said, "I always think that was most important for anyone, but especially a black woman, to see where they are, and to visualize where they want to be. And if you want to be in this or that seat, then take a look at the footsteps you need to take along that pathway." Participant 7 stated, "I think that a lot of black women try to network with other like-minded people. And sometimes that's a little tricky because, you know, you're competing, or you may be competing for the same role. But I do think that joining professional organizations, networking with professional women organizations..." Participant 1 said, "I would definitely look for opportunities, and to insert yourself into things that come up, volunteer for things, even if they're things that you're not 100% comfortable with, get out your comfort zone, and do it anyway."

Participants were also transparent with the types of perseverance strategies that were necessary for growth. One of the key factors that contribute to success in this context is the ability to persevere in the face of adversity. The participants described perseverance strategies that required adopting a determined and resilient approach to progressing in the workplace, despite the potential barriers that exist. The strategies shared by the participants were crucial in professional settings where systemic barriers and discrimination often impede progress and limit opportunities for Black women. The commonalities that emerged within this subtheme included networking, joining professional organizations, continual learning, and surrounding self with like-minded women who look similar.

A successful manager requires many skills and attributes, including effective communication, strategic thinking, and strong leadership abilities. However, one key factor contributing to success in this role is the ability to persevere. Managers often face complex situations, make difficult decisions and effectively lead their teams. To be a successful manager, participants shared strategies that managers should adopt. As the participants advanced within the workplace, they shared the perseverance strategies necessary to be successful managers. Self-care was a common strategy. But they also shared unique perspectives for success.

Perseverance strategies are used as a tool for achieving success. In the study, some of the participants' strategies included building supportive networks and seeking mentorship or guidance from experienced individuals or individuals who resembled them. The participants also described perseverance strategies needed in life beyond management and the workplace. Several participants saw a need for perseverance strategies to level up. Participant 7 said, "I do think that you still have to have strategies of how you not only managed, but if you're looking to go another step up, you have to have some type of strategies to keep your mental health together, because it's not easy being in management, it is just not okay." Participant 1 stated, "Yeah, I think everyone does, regardless of race and gender, you should. It just helps to elevate to the next level."

THEME 3: OWN PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

All participants had to own their professional growth. The responsibility for professional development often rests on the individual, who must take ownership of their learning to achieve their goals. This theme emerged in a qualitative study that explored participants' experiences as they navigated the workplace, highlighting the importance of taking an active role in their professional development. Participants in the study shared their perspectives on owning their professional development and the resources they used to achieve their goals. There was one participant who mentioned being in charge of professional development in her current role, so her access was readily available. Several participants mentioned not having access to resources and agreed to not having managerial support in some of their roles. Participant 5 stated, "I just try to create my own opportunities for professional development, whether it be serving on boards or doing things like actually paying for mentorship through organizations like Black and HR and different groups who share my plight." Participant 9 said, "I do a lot of training through SHRM, the local SHRM that we have in St. Louis, and other HR organizations, I also do a lot of training and professional development with those different groups as well."

One participant had total access to resources. Participant 6 shared, "I am in a fortunate situation. I am in charge of the professional development of my organization." One other participant, Participant 5 stated, "I will say my level of access to resources is pretty good. I believe it is only because I almost demand it in order to do my job. I just make sure I have an irrefutable justification for why I need a certain resource, regardless of the cost." Participant 1 also mentioned, "I've had pretty good access to resources and training to get me to where I am now. Um, the company I currently work for, is phenomenal and is the best one I've ever worked at. Now when it comes... well, so to this stay on that question, right now, it's been good even at every company I've worked for, in terms of training and that type of development, it's been good." Several other participants did not have the luxury of having access to resources.

Participant 1 recalled, "My managerial support... for the training has been good. Now, managerial support, it's been sporadic. Okay. So, when I first started out, it wasn't good at all. It wasn't horrible. But

it wasn't what I would have expected. And I learned a lot." Participant 8 said, "I got support from some and from some I didn't, at the second job. ... it depended on who was managing the firm as to your level of support, and resources." Participant 5 recalled, "In terms of managerial support for professional development, I wouldn't say I've had a lot of managerial support for that."

THEME 4: IMPORTANT RESOURCES FOR BLACK WOMEN

The experiences of Black women have been characterized by systemic barriers that often limit their opportunities and prospects for success. The participants in the study have relied on a range of resources to support their growth and achievement. This theme emerged from the shared perspectives of study participants, who identified the critical resources that helped them overcome many obstacles, build networks, and advance in their careers. These resources included mentorship, access to information and knowledge, supportive networks, and perseverance strategies that enabled them to overcome adversity.

THEME 5: HINDSIGHT WHEN PURSUING MANAGEMENT ROLES

Pursuing management roles has been a unique path for the participants of this study. Participants shared unique insights and perspectives on what they wished they had known beforehand. This theme emerged from the shared experiences and reflections of study participants, who identified how they would have approached their careers if they had the benefit of hindsight while pursuing managerial roles. Participant 9 shared, "That's a good question. [Laughter] So if I, if I look back at a previous employer, I would say that I probably would have taken time to learn the organization a little bit more, learn the parties a little bit more. And just kind of learn some of the historical contexts of how things happen and why things happen. For those particular reasons, I think I would have probably taken a step back and try to identify certain things that I didn't necessarily know at that point in time that I needed to, just because I had come from places where I had been promoted constantly." Participant 5 said, "I think one thing I would have done differently while exploring the roles would be to purposely seek out companies or organizations that truly want people who look like me there."

CONCLUSION

Black women often face more gender and racial biases while advancing into management positions in corporate America than their White male and female counterparts (Alter, 2017; Gee & Peck, 2018; Bui, 2019; Loutfi, 2019; McFeeters, 2019; Washington & Roberts, 2019). Perseverance is often used to continue pursuing goals, despite failures or adversity in progress (Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, and Kelly, 2007). This study addressed a gap in the literature and provided new knowledge for understanding Black women's lived experiences and how they used perseverance strategies to ascend into managerial roles.

Using descriptive phenomenology, this research uncovered the nature of realism, where only experience can determine its meaning (Heidegger, 1962/1995, p. 44). This research study addressed a real problem, substantiated in the literature, and may promote positive social change. Through their lived experiences, participants in the study described the phenomena of their experiences with gender and racial biases and related perseverance strategies. Participants also described important resources that helped in their journey. Our research study may impact positive social change at the individual, organizational, and societal/policy levels.

At the individual level, this study's findings can potentially and significantly impact Black women advancing into management positions in corporate America. By shedding light on the challenges and barriers Black women face, this study can help inform and empower individuals experiencing similar struggles in the workplace. Specifically, the study findings can provide a framework for navigating the workplace and employing perseverance strategies to enhance their ability to ascend into managerial roles and beyond. The study findings also bring awareness to the perpetuation of gender and racial biases. Gender

and racial biases continue to affect how Black women advance in the workplace (Hall, Everett & Hamilton-Mason, 2012).

At the organizational level, the study findings can inform and empower organizations to develop policies and practices that support diversity, equity, and inclusion. Specifically, the study findings can inform the development of policies and practices that promote equal opportunities for Black women to advance in management positions. The study findings can also inform the development of training programs for managers and employees that promote cultural competency and awareness.

At the societal/policy level, the study findings can inform and empower policymakers to develop policies and practices that promote diversity, equity, and inclusion in the workplace. Specifically, the study findings can inform the development of policies and practices that address systemic barriers to advancement for Black women in management positions. The study findings can also inform the development of legislation that promotes equal opportunities for advancement into management positions.

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