Making Sense of Her Journey: Exploring African American Female Executives’ Leadership Experiences within Nonprofit Organizations

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Dedication

To my sisters whose strength and worth are undeniable
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Abstract of Dissertation

Making Sense of Her Journey: Exploring African American¹ Female Executives’ Leadership Experiences within Nonprofit Organizations

African American females have a desire to lead and some have even reached the executive leadership table. However, as there remains a significant absence of African American female executives at the nonprofit leadership table, by investing in this group of resilient and determined women, nonprofit organizations are better positioned to meet the critical needs of their communities, encourage diversity in decision-making and strategically tap into the leadership experiences of a group of women who are often being served by this industry.

This study explored how African American female executives made sense of their leadership experiences within the nonprofit industry in the United States. Through exploring the lived experiences as narratives shared by African American female executives within the nonprofit industry, this study offered insight into the complexities of their levels of oppression and discrimination and how these uniquely positioned women made sense of their leadership journeys within their organizational settings. Specifically, this study sought to make a valuable contribution to Black Feminist Thought/Theory (BFT) in the nonprofit industry in particular, as a majority of the literature has been focused on academic settings.

The research sample included nine (9) African American females who are or were executive directors of a nonprofit organization based in the United States. The time

¹ The researcher chose to use African American versus Black when referring to the participant group, as this label is used in EEO data, however the researcher hopes to allow the space for the participant to freely choose their own label.
period studied was bound by the years (1990 to 2020) to ensure the foundational research related to Black Feminist Thought/Theory (BFT) and current research were captured. This study utilized qualitative research methods through narrative inquiry analysis. Data have been collected from participant interviews, as transcribed from digital recordings. This study was based on four key assumptions; 1) Sensemaking as a process was central to the participants’ unique lived experiences, 2) Oppression was a constant, ever-present and institutionalized obstacle under which the participants lived into their executive leadership experiences, 3) African American females often had interconnected experiences of multiple identities in society, and 4) African American sisterhood was an intentional relationship the women built or sought out to provide a supportive space as African American female executives within the nonprofit industry. This study showed how ultimately, who the women were could not be confined to only one identity, as their realities consistently supported them living out their experiences through the intersection of their multiple systems of oppressions connected to the interwoven nature of their race, gender, and for some class.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

Nonprofit organizations are primarily organized around a common purpose, whether to work on social problems, empower neighborhoods or even respond to needs in their communities (Sherman, 2018). Hence, the nonprofit industry is built upon a foundation of citizen action, and it is this focus that drives most nonprofits today (Salamon, 1999). There were an estimated 12,488,563 million employees in the nonprofit industry in 2017, which encompasses approximately 10.2% of total U.S. private sector employment (Bureau of Labor Statistics [BLS], 2018). This industry has more employees combined across construction, real estate, transportation, and professional services industries (Salamon & Newhouse, 2019). The nonprofit industry, with its focus on a greater good, can offer employees who are innately motivated, with great work ethics, and strong commitment and motivation, towards engaging in work that is meaningful and valuable (Light, 2011).

Not only do nonprofit organizations seek to better the world through advocacy programs and other community enhancing methods, they also continue to contribute to the success of the economy. Nonprofits accounted for approximately $1.047.2 trillion of the United States economy and thus 5.6% of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in 2016 (McKeever, 2020). Furthermore, the third sector, (also referred to as the independent sector, voluntary sector, philanthropic sector, social sector, tax-exempt sector, or the charitable sector) with its 7.7% of the United States workforce, is one of the largest employers across industries (Salamon, 2013). With there being 1.54 million nonprofits in 2016 across the United States (McKeever, 2020), the prominence of this industry is clear within our society. Additionally, from their social services work across a variety of
communities including social counseling, welfare, job/vocational/rehabilitative training, day/residential care (Schmid et al., 2008), taking care of veterans, empowering women, educating children, caring for the sick and elderly and protecting our nation’s many environmental resources, nonprofits are a vital component of our country’s economic and social well-being.

The nonprofit industry, with its substantial reach and relevance, and in 2018 with nearly $427.71 billion provided through private giving from individuals, foundations, and other nonprofit businesses (Giving USA, 2019), research indicates that despite these statistics, nonprofit positions such as executive director, deputy director and consequently executive leadership of nonprofit organizations do not reflect the people of color whom they serve (Landles-Cobb et al., 2015). According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2019), as of July 1, 2019, approximately 41.8% of the U.S. population was comprised of people of color and approximately 22% of the workforce was people of color (BLS, 2018). As shared by Hayes (2012), however, 82% of nonprofit employees are White, 10% are African American, 5% are Hispanic/Latino, 3% are other, and only 1% are Asian/Pacific Islanders. Employees of color only makeup 28% of senior executive roles (Jones, 2017), and therefore continue to struggle with climbing the executive ladder. These data suggest that the nonprofit industry is not aligning itself with the demographic shifts in our country’s population.

Specific to this disconnect, Price (2017) shared that most board leaders (nonprofit executives and board chairs included) ignore the lack of diversity in organizational leadership, which often sends a message to donors, communities and other constituents that nonprofits are not truly connected with their communities, nor do they embrace their
needs. Price (2017) posited that this message of disregard implies that nonprofits have a disconnect between what they practice and preach, in particular as it relates to diversity and ethnicity. With its foundations and operations built upon serving and meeting the diverse culture, language and experiences of often underserved communities, there continues to be an unequal playing field related to the race of nonprofit leaders (Suarez, 2017). These nonprofit communities want to know that at all levels, their voices, values, beliefs and needs are being carried forward with the intent of fighting for fair and equal representation.

In a recent BoardSource (2017) study, only 10% of nonprofit executive directors were racially diverse. While 60% of the country identifies as White, 90% of CEOs, 84% of board members and 94% of foundation presidents were White (D5coalition.org, 2013). These statistics point to a distinct challenge for people of color to advance within this industry. With the ranks of the nonprofit industry being scant on people of color, nonprofit boards are also predominantly male, with the majority of nonprofit CEOs being male (Di Mento, 2014). With changing demographics impacting the U.S. workforce, Price (2017) continued to see that a focus on diversifying nonprofit executive leadership and board leadership is not a priority, especially as there was a general belief that nonprofit organizations “favored men over equally qualified women for leadership positions” (Guerrero, 2020, p.1). Still, while the literature offers examples of White women holding executive leadership roles in the nonprofit industry (Managance Consulting, 2004), African American females are mostly absent from the executive leadership roles of nonprofit organizations (Bascuas, 2013).
In an industry where serving the people and instinctively the community are the core of its mission, ensuring diversity in the executive leadership of nonprofit organizations, helps safeguard meaningful and relevant programs, activities and services that support and give voice to the needs of the community. As experienced in workplace settings, ensuring that diverse perspectives are around the nonprofit executive leadership table, which provide the opportunity to empower a culture of questioning and inclusive thinking, can help to tear down walls and the system of poverty, power and privilege which impede our thinking in the United States (Carter et al., 2003; Erhardt et al., 2003; Ferreira 2010; Miller & Triana, 2009). In light of this industry’s mission, clientele and based on the statistics of the industry’s leadership makeup, it is evident there is a gap between those who benefit from the services of nonprofit organizations and those who lead its efforts, in particular, African American women. Historically, African American women have made sense of their presence in society as being unequally and unfairly limited in their ability to find social justice as it relates to their race, gender and other identities (Roberts et al., 2018). In particular, African American women make sense of their leadership experiences through often facing the expectation that they must be better, smarter, faster, and must jump higher than others, if they want to have a seat at the leadership table (Roberts et al., 2018). Through the process of sensemaking, seen as a continual and equally retrospective and prospective process whereby the meaning assigned to lived experiences is “an ongoing present in which past experience is projected upon possible futures” (Hernes & Maitlis, 2010b, p. 27), this community of women is different than African American men, White women or other minority women. Specifically, African American women find themselves at the crossroads of multiple
forms of dominance (Collins, 1986) and oppression and as a result continually make sense of their presence in society as having to be visible, yet invisible and therefore burdened with the “emotional, mental, and physical energy o[f] trying to hide some part of ourselves” (Wallace, 2019, p.1).

As this industry, whereby human service organizations represent the largest sector and are focused on social work, overwhelmingly serves the ignored, excluded or oppressed (Pease, 2006) groups within our communities, it is smart business to ensure the executive leadership of nonprofit organizations consistently relate to and reflect their diverse communities to facilitate execution of their missions and an awareness of the challenges facing minority groups (Hayes, 2012). As women who have an “incredible appetite for learning and preparing [themselves] for leadership,” (McGirt, 2017, p.4) African American females can offer organizations a unique perspective. Further, these women who come to their positions with substantiated qualifications, education, skill-sets, background and validated experiences with building donor relationships and collaborating with partners, (Taylor, 2018) African American female leaders and other leaders of color have shown themselves to be more competent and qualified as compared to their White leaders in the industry (Tempel, 2007). By focusing on hiring and promoting people of color, in particular African American females, into the most senior levels of a nonprofit organization, one is often presented with a leader who has high emotional intelligence, is astute at interpreting and responding to the interpersonal and political intricacies of their organizations, and who ultimately is substantively agile in her ability to cleverly transform hindrances into chances to gain knowledge, grow, and eventually surpass expectations (Roberts et al., 2018).
In speaking about the qualifications of African American females, the researcher found that their identity as understood within the context of being an African American female executive in the United States and within the nonprofit industry, was not defined as only one single identity (Rosette & Livingston, 2012). Rather, these women experienced life from the context of multiple intersecting identities at different levels, which directly impacted how they made sense of their leadership experiences within the workforce (Rosette & Livingston, 2012). This framework of interconnected identities, called intersectionality, provides the platform from which to conceptualize the experiences an individual or group faces related to discrimination and prejudice in order to understand the complexity of prejudices they face (YW Boston, 2017). Intersectionality has been considered the centralized place for the intertwined and opposing dynamics of race, class, gender, sexuality, disability, and other disparities (Cho et al., 2013). The interconnected nature of gender, race and professional identity, often creates an environment of oppression for the African American female leader whereby they experience barriers, setbacks and challenges because of these intersections (Roberts et al., 2018). Ultimately, intersectionality gives rise to the space where African American female leaders experience multiple oppressions at the same time (Carastathis, 2014).

Because of the intersection of being African and womanhood and further society’s perception of African American females as being stereotyped as the “Mammy, Matriarch, Sapphire, and Jezebel” (Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010, p. 173), African American female leaders often find themselves feeling as though they are an organization’s “purple unicorn” (Roberts et al., 2018, p.8). Not only has society imposed these negative stereotypes upon the African American female, but as shared by Collins
“the Black American woman has had to admit that while nobody knew the troubles she saw, everybody, his brother and his dog, felt qualified to explain her, even to herself” (p. 69). Collins asserted, the Mammy, who was characterized as the “faithful, obedient, domestic servant” (Collins, 2000, p. 72). This characterization was “created to justify the economic exploitation of house slaves and sustained to explain Black women’s long-standing restriction to domestic service” (Collins, 2000, p. 72). Relatedly, the Matriarch, who represents the mother-figure in African American households, was created and imposed upon “African American women who dared reject the image of the submissive, hardworking servant” (Collins, 2000, p. 75). The Sapphire was characterized as the “rude, loud, malicious, stubborn, and overbearing, Angry Black Woman” (Pilgrim, 2008, p.1). Finally, the Jezebel (present-day “hoe,” “whore,” or “hoochie,”) represents African American women as having excessive sexual appetites whose purpose was to provide sexual favors and thus were seen as sexual deviants.

All of these negative and degrading images, which individually are central to intersecting oppressions of class, race and gender, once joined together, “reveal the disadvantage and discrimination that accrues from the combination of identities” (Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010, p. 176). These intersecting realities “mutually construct one another—being female influences one’s experience as an African American, and being African American influences one’s experience as a female,” (Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010, p.176). This interaction between their race and gender, ultimately impacted how these women made sense of their lived experiences as executives within the nonprofit industry.
Statement of the Problem

Until July 2017, Standard & Poor’s (S&P) 500 was able to highlight one African American female executive (McGregor, 2015), and the literature offered distinct illustrations of the leadership identity of African American female executives in for-profit corporations (Warner, 2014), higher education (Cain, 2015), and nursing (Wright, 2012). However, literature indicated that minorities, in particular African American females, were nearly nonexistent in executive leadership positions in nonprofits (Taylor, 2018). Through the process of sensemaking, representing the process by which people make sense of the world around them inclusive of their own actions, reactions and behaviors relative to an organizational setting (Kolko, 2010), the researcher hoped to add perspective to the literature on how this unique group of leaders made sense of their leadership experiences in such a lonely context.

With many African American women leaders being keenly aware of their professional identity within society, intersectionality offers a foundation from which they can begin to unravel the interlocking systems of oppression (Crenshaw, 1989) they face in their workplaces. Embracing these social constructions helps to provide a platform for how these women make sense of their experiences in the nonprofit industry. Through the process of sensemaking, African American women can give voice, language, texture and relevance to their leadership experiences, thus helping to remove any constraints that impede their ascension into positions of executive leadership (Richardson & Loubier, 2008). As a result, sensemaking can provide a pathway for African American female leaders to uncover and tear down negative identities, such as African American women
being stereotyped as incompetent and intellectually inferior (Hall et al., 2012), which hinder their progress.

According to Weick et al (2005), not only does sensemaking allow for individuals to construct their own unique work identities, but it also allows African American female executives to utilize this process within their work environments to shed light on the “socially and historically embedded [identity] dynamics” (Ospina & Foldy, 2009, p. 885) within the nonprofit workplace. Uniquely positioned in the role of executive in the nonprofit industry, African American female executives are often required to make sense of their positions of power and authority in stereotypically gendered and racialized contexts which often create an internal (personal) and external warring of their leadership identity and experiences (Dishman, 2016). While it is clear that all minority women in executive leadership roles across public and private organizations continue to remain underrepresented (Fuhrmans, 2020), the race-based stereotypes imposed upon African American women have been shown to result in an increased frequency of them having to justify their credibility and authority and having minimal support within their organizations (Roeland, 2016). Also, as race is often an added lens through which society views women, for African American women whose race is often what is most visible, such categorizations form the platform from which stereotypes are imposed (Ayman & Korabik, 2010). African American professional women often “experience situations in which their authority is undermined, their competence is compromised and their power limited” (Gaetane, Williams & Sherman, 2009, p.566). Consequently, with African American women often carrying multiple identities, they are left behind because they are too different from other minority women, African American men and White women alike
(Combs, 2003). Moreover, as shared by Bell and Nkomo (2001), due to an inhibiting “concrete wall” which cannot be penetrated and in turn keeps African American women from engaging with the organization, and as a result makes these women invisible to those in power (U.S. Glass Ceiling Commission, 1995), African American women are prevented from ascending the leadership ladder as their historical identity has been aligned with being a servant who works in lower positions.

It is clear through the African American female leadership experience, “considering issues of gender outside a cultural context yields an incomplete picture of reality” (Hite, 2007, p. 21). Further, research shows that identities tied to race, ethnicity and gender are interlocked and must be studied concurrently when taking into consideration the personal and professional experiences of female leaders of color (Hite, 2007). Thus, research suggests that through sensemaking, these leaders can intentionally frame their workplace experiences through application of emotional intelligence, self-awareness, and critical cognition (Ancona, 2012).

As a relational and social process, where interpersonal interactions matter (Weick, 1995), sensemaking affords African American female executives, within the nonprofit industry, whose leadership experiences cannot be compared to any other racial group, the opportunity to engage in retrospective and introspective processes of identity construction within the White, male-dominant leadership culture of a nonprofit organization. Through the process of sensemaking, the African American female executive can better understand and make sense of her leadership journey and identity within this industry.
Although a meaningful and powerful process through which African American female executives in the nonprofit industry may provide meaning to their workplace leadership experiences, sensemaking as a process has yet to be discovered from the perspective of African American female executives within the context of the nonprofit industry (Kramer, 2016). Consequently, as stated in Weick et al. (2005), the identity of “organizational actors shapes what we enact and how we interpret” (p. 416) our experiences within organizations. Thus, through this process, African American female executives have an opportunity to acknowledge their individual experiences within this industry and share their leadership journeys with those who come behind them.

In order to create a path for other African American female leaders to reach executive leadership opportunities within the nonprofit industry, there is a need to look at the leadership experiences of these women. For the African American female executive, who is often faced with the intersecting realities and challenges of race, gender and their professional identity, research has shown that these women often embraced a very unique quality: resilience (Turney, 2019). For these women, leadership was a journey whereby when faced with having to justify their relevance, defend their credibility and reject being valued as solely a servant, they were often found to know how to bounce back from defeat or rejection, refused to get distracted or derailed by lack of support, and consequently maintained forward movement (Roberts et al., 2018). Making sense of their leadership experiences required these women to be emotionally intelligent, authentic and agile (McGregor, 2018). Yet, African American female executive leaders were often burdened with the challenge of being visible and invisible; visible in the sense that they were often the “only one” and thus always stood out, while invisible in the sense that they
often were mistaken for “the help” or the support staff (Wallace, 2019). Further since slavery, the controlling and negative view of African American women has been that they should be the laborers (Banks, 2019). Such a toil on these women’s emotions required them to lead from a place of consistently making sense of their own self-worth, value and relevance in the context of a world of turned backs and concrete walls. With a great number of our local nonprofit organizations committed to serving a large number of minority constituents, they often lack the leadership that mirrors their communities served (Taylor, 2018). Consequently, ensuring that African American female executives sit at the helm of more nonprofits can offer a personal and credible connection to the work in which nonprofits engage. Ultimately, how the African American female nonprofit leader identifies and sees herself will directly impact her leadership experiences in this industry.

**Purpose of Study and Research Question**

The purpose of this study was to explore how African American female executives made sense of their leadership experiences within the nonprofit industry in the United States. This study utilized qualitative methods to provide context, description and explanation to these experiences (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). Exploring the leadership journeys of African American female executives through narrative analysis shed light on how these women made sense of their unique, lived executive leadership experiences.

This study was guided by the following research question: *How do African American female executives make sense of their leadership experiences in the nonprofit industry in the United States?*
Significance of the Study

With there being no direct connection of the early feminist theories to the African American female experiences (Vannoy, 2001), the findings of this study helped to add context to Black Feminist Thought/Theory (BFT) as well as expand BFT in the nonprofit industry. Through BFT, African American women become owners of power and knowledge (Collins, 1990). Specifically, through this theory, African American women are characterized as being self-defined and self-reliant, thus independent women who give voice to their intersecting realities of race, gender, and class oppression (Collins, 1990) and in turn live as empowered beings. Black Feminist Thought/Theory (BFT) facilitates African American women to embrace a changed consciousness, that is focused on transforming the political and economic institutions of society as a path for true social change (Collins, 1990). Through BFT, this study adopted sense making as a process to help show how African American female executives made sense of their multiple identities and leadership identity. Through the exploration of African American female executives’ leadership experiences, the researcher discovered the realities of being an African American female executive in this industry. Moreover, as sensemaking has yet to be discovered from the perspective of African American female executives within the context of the nonprofit industry, this study sought to enhance the role of sensemaking and its relevance to leadership for African American female executives.

As African American females have a desire to lead (McGirt, 2017) and some have even secured a seat at the executive leadership table, findings sought to shed light on how these women made sense of their leadership experiences in the nonprofit industry and thus brought to life their individual experiences. However, as there remains a notable
absence of African American female executives at the nonprofit leadership table (Taylor, 2018), by investing in this group of resilient and determined women, nonprofit organizations are better positioned to meet the dynamic needs of their communities, encourage diversity in decision-making and strategically tap into the leadership experiences of these women who are often being served by this industry.

**Theoretical and Conceptual Frameworks**

While early feminist theory focused on the experiences of the White, middle-class woman as being representative of all women (Vannoy, 2001), African American women began to not trust that their White feminist “sisters” would invest in eradicating racism. Specifically, African American women did not see White women adopt African American women’s issues as their own, push forward organizational integration and share the leadership opportunities with women of color (Danto, 2004). It was evident that White women continuously invested their energies in organizations which promoted their own interests (Taylor, 1998). In Black Feminist Thought/Theory (BFT), the African American female is portrayed as a strong woman who has a distinct identity among minority women and in particular, compared with White women (Rosette & Livingston, 2012). As African American women engage in society, their daily experiences with institutionalized racism, stemming from slavery, racial segregation and discrimination, are evident and tangible (Collins, 2000). In social experiences from housing, schooling, and employment (Massey & Denton, 1993), African American women experience racism in daily social interaction (St. Jean & Feagin, 1998). This historically oppressed group of women have much to conquer and overcome in a society that has consistently kept them from progressing.
With a legacy of oppression upon their shoulders, African American women are bound to “interconnected relationships of White supremacy and male superiority; a struggle which has placed these women in between two opposing realities of White privilege and oppression, with Black exploitation and oppression” (Collins, 2000, p. 26). Yet, while the collective experiences of African American women are based upon constant and ongoing struggle, the uniqueness of each individual African American female’s reality calls attention to different experiences and their handling of such oppressive systems (McGregor, 2018). The roles these women play as it relates to their identity, i.e. “social categories in which an individual claims membership as well as the personal meaning associated with those categories,” (Shields, 2008, p.1) can create spaces of benefit or oppression within the workplace. Being able to capture the individual leadership experiences of each African American female executive was mediated through the process of sensemaking to explore how Black Feminist Thought/Theory (BFT) was utilized to help understand their realities within the nonprofit industry.

In speaking about the unique identity of each African American female leader, researchers Day and Harrison (2007) portrayed leader identity in a way that focused on a leader self-identifying as a leader, which empowered the leader to further develop leadership skills (Day et al., 2005). Through this perspective, leadership is viewed through an identity lens, as identity is a melding of an individual leader’s values, experiences and self-perceptions (Baltes & Carstensen, 1991). Specifically, as a leader engages from within the context of challenging situations and circumstances and through the interconnected nature of experiences, who the leader is, is developed (Day &
Harrison, 2007). Such focus on leader identity helps the leader understand and come to
terms with who they are, what matters most, what are their strengths and weaknesses and
what may keep them grounded (Day & Harrison, 2007). According to Ibarra, et al.
(2014), African American women’s “personal identities and role identities are related
through a common system of meaning” (p. 9).

Leader identity, among the genders, often shows up with women being
underrepresented in the senior most leadership positions in the workplace (Ibarra, et al.,
2014). Specifically, due to the institutionalized patterns of gender oppression within the
workplace, which often “stem from workplace structures, cultures, and patterns of
interaction that inadvertently favor men – shape and often interfere with, the identity
work of women leaders” (Ibarra, et. al, 2014, p.12). With leader characteristics of being
collective, kind, selfless and nurturing (Ibarra, et al., 2014), coupled with the intersecting
oppressions of race, class, gender and sexuality imposed upon the African American
female, such structures continue to reign as an assault on African American female
identity in the workplace and society.

The professional leader identity of the African American female executive can be
centered on their leadership abilities, self-image and identity. Specifically, “at the core of
the identity approach to leadership effectiveness was an understanding that the way that
we perceive ourselves, our self-concept, or identity strongly informs our feelings, beliefs,
attitudes, goals, and behavior” (Muir, 2014, p. 352). According to Leader Identity
Theory (LIT), African American women embrace their professional identity by relying
on intuition and self-awareness (Ancona, 2012). As women who even in the workplace
often wear many overlapping roles, self-awareness allows these leaders to grasp their
unique talents, strengths, sense of purpose, core values, beliefs and desires” (Avolio & Gardner, 2005, p. 324). Such a level of consistent self-evaluation, offers the leader a key foundation in how they identify as leaders (Lord & Hall, 2005). Leaning on the tenets of Leader Identity Theory, African American female executives within the nonprofit industry are able to explore the “various roles [they] play in organizations and society” (Ibarra, et al., 2014, p. 5). Consequently, possessing multiple identities often created a space whereby African American female executives pushed forward their “right to define [their] own reality, establish [their] own identities and name [their] history” (Collins, 2000, p. 72).

From a perspective of knowing one’s leader identity and being constrained not only between racial, class and gender boundaries, through Racial Identity Theory (RIT), African American females can come to understand their realities of consistently being labeled and stereotyped based upon an institutionalized, historical and cultural experience within American and African society (Sellers, et al, 1998). Early researchers of racial identity theories landed on two foundational theories; the underground and mainstream approaches. With its early work dating back to W. E. B. DuBois (1903), the underground approach centered on the distinctness of African Americans oppression and cultural experiences and the mainstream approach, with its origins dating back to Gordon Allport (1954), has concentrated on general features of group identity (Sellers, et al, 1998). In Mainstream Racial Identity Theory, the focus tends to be on more “general processes and structures of racial and ethnic identity” (Verkuyten & Brug, 2002, p. 123) and concentrates less on the qualitative significances related to a certain racial or ethnic identity (Sellers, et al.,1998). In Underground Racial Identity Theory, the authentic
cultural and structural experiences connected with the status of African Americans (e.g., Cross, 1991; Parham, 1989) is considered. Specifically, African Americans come to grips with their race and the world where they live (Verkuyten & Brug, 2002) and the “role that history and culture play in the qualitative and experiential meanings associated with being Black” (Sellers, et al., 1998, p. 21). In particular through the Underground approach, there is a focus on the stereotypes tied to being African American within U.S. society. Through the framework of RIT (specifically through the Underground approach), African American female executives are encouraged to own their unique and authenticated voices and experiences, instead of being dejected by them (Tatum, 1992). With a realistic understanding of their own internal expressions of oppressions through the Underground approach, African American females are empowered to move beyond stereotypes, victimization and discrimination. Consequently, focusing on the essence of being African American is central to discovering how African American females make sense of their experiences as executives within the nonprofit industry.

While there is a dearth of literature examining BFT and RIT within the same context, in particular the nonprofit industry, and with both of their foundations being based upon the interconnected nature of race, identity, oppression and discrimination, it is clear that a framework built upon intersectionality is relevant. As a “multifaceted perspective which acknowledges the richness of the multiple socially constructed identities that combine to create each of us as an individual” (Lind, 2010, p. 3), intersectionality creates a space where the African American female executive who is simultaneously African American, female and a leader cannot be defined by one single identity. Through exploring the lived experiences as narratives shared by African
American female executives within the nonprofit industry, this study offered insight into the complexities of their levels of oppression and discrimination and how these uniquely positioned women made sense of their leadership journeys within their organizational settings. Specifically, this study sought to make a valuable contribution to Black Feminist Thought/Theory (BFT) in the nonprofit industry in particular, as a majority of the literature has been focused on academic settings.

In Figure 1.1 (below), one will find this study’s conceptual framework. This figure was developed to illustrate the interconnected relationships between African American females, leadership, identity, sensemaking, BFT and RIT. This study explored how African American female executives made sense of their leadership experiences within the context of the nonprofit industry. These interconnected identities of being an African American, female and leader are captured within the vertical dotted-line oval. The large solid square represents the strong, unique and rich context of the nonprofit industry in the United States. With identity being a fundamental lens through which these women made sense of their executive leadership experiences within the nonprofit industry, it is represented by the large dotted-line oval, reflecting the permeability of identity. The theoretical frameworks, Black Feminist Thought/Theory (BFT), Leader Identity Theory, and Racial Identity Theory, used to inform our understanding of these women’s experiences, are represented by the three overlapping circles.
Summary of Methodology

This study set out to explore how the African American female executive in the nonprofit industry made sense of her leadership experiences. A narrative inquiry approach was used. Narrative inquiry offers each participant a voice within a particular context. Specifically, in narrative inquiry, the significance of the mutual construction of the research relationship is emphasized, whereby, the individual is simultaneously living, telling, retelling and reliving their lived experiences (Clandinin & Connelly, 1990). Clandinin and Connelly (1990) further posited, narrative inquiry provides both a lens related to experience and method. By naming the experience which was studied (executive leadership) as well as the system of inquiry (telling stories), this process facilitated the process of describing the lived experiences of African American women, capturing their lived experiences and then writing down their lived experiences for others
to share. Ultimately, while it is often said that narrative inquiry will start through a process of getting to know the individual’s experience, it also became a discovery of “the social, cultural and institutional narratives within which individual’s experiences [were] constituted, shaped, expressed and enacted” (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2006, p. 42).

**Sample Selection**

Birmingham (2010) recommended engaging two participants, Smith and Sparkes (2006) recommended 14 participants and Huber and Whelan (1999) recommended engaging one or two participants in a narrative inquiry. For this study, the researcher gained insight into the lived experiences of nine (9) individual African American women who are or had been executives in the nonprofit industry. This sample size was chosen for several reasons: 1) research has shown there is a limited number of African American female executives within the nonprofit industry (Taylor, 2018), 2) the sample size for narrative inquiry research spans from 1 to over 300, 3) the researcher expected to reach across nonprofit organizations of varying size, budget and areas of focus and 4) the researcher hoped to get a reasonable cross-section of ages and tenures of African American female executives. The researcher utilized purposeful and snowball sampling in order to meet the data collection needs of this research study. Purposeful sampling allowed the researcher to “select individuals and sites for study because they can purposefully inform an understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon in the study” (Creswell, 2013, p.125). Snowball sampling allowed the researcher to connect with additional African American female executives through the relationships they had with other African American female executives within this industry.
Data Collection Methods

The researcher used interviews to gain insight into how African American female executives made sense of their leadership experiences in the nonprofit industry. This method of data collection was chosen as it offered a meaningful process for capturing the lived and told experiences of these women. Interviews served as the primary source of data collection because the interviewer was able to capture the fullness of the interviewees’ experiences (Creswell, 2013). This study utilized a modified version of Seidman (2013) three-interview series process, with an emphasis in the first interview of discovering the narrative of the experience and in the second interview reflecting on the meaning making of the experience. The researcher chose to use the modified version of Seidman’s three-interview series due to the limited time/scheduling availability often experienced by this high-demand and exclusive group of executives. Cohen et al. (2000) have found having two interviews is an effective way to engage in the interview process. The two interviews lasted between 45 to 90 minutes each and were transcribed from digital recordings, coded for themes, and analyzed to ensure the participant’s lived experiences were captured.

Data Analysis

In narrative inquiry and as recommended by Riessman (2008), there are three possible approaches to data analysis: 1) thematic analysis, whereby the researcher will identify particular themes shared by the participants; 2) structural analysis, whereby the researcher focused on how the story was told, through use of references to it being a tragedy, satire, romance, or other form; or 3) dialogic/performance analysis, whereby the
inquiry focused on the production and performance of the story as shared interactively between the researcher and the participant. This study focused on thematic analysis, as the researcher brought to life the lived journeys of how these African American female executives made sense of their leadership experiences within the nonprofit industry.

While thematic analysis has not generally been considered a reputable analytical process, “Braun and Clarke (2006) argued that thematic analysis should be a foundational method for qualitative analysis, as it provides core skills for conducting many other forms of qualitative analysis” (Nowell, et al., 2017, p. 2). Also, as the manner in which a researcher can identify, analyze, organize, describe and report on themes contained in the data (Nowell, et al., 2017), thematic analysis offered a comprehensive method for evaluating the leadership experiences of African American female nonprofit executives. Further, as shared by Nowell, et al., (2017) thematic analysis has also been found to be beneficial in studying the viewpoints of diverse research participants. As a result, the researcher engaged the following phases:

Table 1.1 adopted from Nowell, et al. (2017)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phase 1: Familiarizing yourself with your data</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Document theoretical and reflective thoughts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Document thoughts about potential codes/themes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Store raw data in well-organized archives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Keep records of all data field notes, transcripts, and reflexive journals</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Phase 2: Generating initial codes
• Peer debriefing
• Reflexive journaling
• Use of a coding framework
• Audit trail of code generation
• Documentation of all team meeting and peer debriefings

Phase 3: Searching for themes

• Diagramming to make sense of theme connections
• Keep detailed notes about development and hierarchies of concepts and themes

Phase 4: Reviewing themes

• Themes and subthemes vetted by team members
• Test for referential adequacy by returning to raw data

Phase 5: Defining and naming themes

• Peer debriefing
• Team consensus on themes
• Documentation of team meetings regarding themes
• Documentation of theme naming

Phase 6: Producing the report

• Member checking
• Peer debriefing
• Describing process of coding and analysis in sufficient details
• Thick descriptions of context
• Description of the audit trail
• Report on reasons for theoretical, methodological, and analytical choices throughout the entire study

Ultimately, the data analysis process via narrative inquiry was a collaborative process, whereby the researcher and the participant were able to actively “learn and change in the encounter” (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007, p.9). This method facilitated a collective gathering of the participant’s experiences by analyzing the relevant components of each of their individual experiences to include such components as time, place and plot (Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002).

**Delimitations and Limitations**

Delimitations of this study included that this study was bound by its focus solely on African American female executives and no other race/ethnic/minority groups of women, thus inhibiting the inclusion of the leadership experiences of those in non-executive roles, such as Vice Presidents, Directors or Managers; which are populations of African American and other race/ethnic/minority females who may also have leadership experiences to contribute within the nonprofit industry. Another delimitation was that this study was bound solely by the context of the nonprofit industry. Additionally, as the pool of African American female executives was limited across the United States, the richness and depth of the interviews might have been challenged. However, the researcher engaged in member checking to ensure the meaningful details of the
participants’ experiences was authenticated (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and continued to interview participants until saturation was reached.

Limitations of this study included that when conducting interviews, the researcher may have been challenged with the interviewees’ hesitancy to speak and openly share ideas (Creswell, 2013), thereby limiting the adequacy and richness of the information gained about the experiences. Also, as in qualitative research, the researcher serves as the primary data collection instrument (Merriam, 2009) and thus as an African American female, the researcher may have had biases which impacted the study. To mitigate these biases, i.e. subjectivities, the researcher highlighted these experiences in the subjectivity statement and throughout the research process. Also, the researcher utilized member checking to ensure the authentic nature of each participant’s experiences were obtained (Merriam, 2009), as well as field notes and journaling. In addition, as this study did not factor in age (due to the limited pool of available participants), this may have eliminated a criterion which could have added depth to the leadership experiences of the participants and thus could be discussed in more detail in future studies.

**Research Assumptions**

This present study was based upon a few research assumptions. First, the study assumed that African American female executives had a unique and different leadership experience than other minority women (Ayman & Korabik, 2010). Second, the study assumed that African American females often had interconnected experiences of multiple identities in society (Collins, 1990). Finally, the study assumed that the experience of leadership for African American females within the nonprofit industry was marginalized (Bascuas, 2013).
Subjectivity

As this research study involved examining how African American female executives utilized the process of sensemaking to explore their leadership experiences within the nonprofit industry, it was important that the researcher addressed her own subjectivity as it related to where she was positioned within this study. The researcher was an African American female executive and leader within the nonprofit industry and thus acknowledged her own impact as a researcher and a woman.

After having spent the last 15 years as a director in the nonprofit industry, the researcher had a first-hand experience with who did (and did not) make the decisions, how decisions were made, whose voices were heard (and not heard) and who had (and did not have) a seat at the executive leadership table within this industry. Having been in a position of executive board leadership (as President and Vice-Chair) over several nonprofit volunteer organizations, afforded the researcher the opportunity to have experienced the difference between leading as a volunteer, member and staff and leading as the executive. As the researcher was herself an African American female leader, she had directly experienced being silenced, ignored and diminished in her roles and had had to constantly prove her worth and value to keep her seat at the table. She recognized that the complexities of her personal experiences with the study at hand required her to step back, reflect, and validate her own personal experience as her own and thus, not directly the experience of the women who participated in this study.

Yet, with the personal experience of being an African American female leader in the nonprofit industry, the researcher found herself as a true insider. According to Asselin (2003) an insider was one who typically shared a common characteristic, identity,
language, role or experience with the participants. Such a connection required the researcher to engage in the research process with her eyes open wide (Asselin, 2003), acting as if the researcher knew nothing about the experiences at hand. Clearly, the depth of the connection between the researcher and her participants was something to acknowledge and of which to be aware. The credibility that came with the commonality of their memberships (Adler & Adler, 1987) and the depth of conversation shared because of these relationships offered more real, authentic and meaningful sharing of experiences.

**Definition of Key Terms**

To facilitate a meaningful understanding of the key terms used in this study, the below definitions provided the operational uses of concepts which were relevant for this study:

*Black/African American (Not of Hispanic origin):* All persons having origins in any of the Black racial groups of Africa (Equal Employment Opportunity Commission [EEOC], 2008)

*Black Feminist Thought/Theory (BFT):* A critical social construction that strives to “empower African American women within the context of social injustice sustained by intersecting oppressions” (Collins, 2000, p.22)

*Executive (Chief Executive Officer (CEO), Executive Director (ED), President):* The top individual of the organization, who is usually the face of the organization (Ashe-Edmunds, 1995)
Identity: The manner in which “individuals and groups define themselves and are defined by others on the basis of race, ethnicity, religion, language, and culture” (Deng, 1995, p.1)

Intersectionality: The mutually constitutive “dimensions and modalities of social relations and subject formations,” (McCall, 2005, p.1771)

Leader: An individual who creates vision, motivates others, oversees the roll-out of the vision and builds strong and trust in-fused relationships with others (Bass, 1985)

Leader Identity Theory: Centered on “how individuals negotiate among different identities, such as between the personal and social identities…. or how individuals customize an identity to fit their evolving understanding of a setting” (DeRue et al., 2009, p. 8)

Live Into: The process of owning, embracing, putting on, claiming and fully occupying the space and the fullness of the experience.

Nonprofit Industry: The industry that comprises “voluntary,” “charitable,” “independent,” “third” or “nongovernmental” agencies, associations, foundations and groups and fall into the following categories: charitable, advocacy, political, religious, educational, scientific or literary (Lapovsky & Larkin, 2009)

Racial Identity Theory (RIT)- Underground: A “sense of group or collective identity based on one's perception that he or she shares a common racial heritage with a particular racial group” (Helms, 1990, p. 3)
Sensemaking: A “motivated, continuous effort to understand connections (which can be among people, places and events) in order to anticipate their trajectories and act effectively” (Klein et al., 2006, p. 71)

Overview of the Study

Research in the nonprofit industry has shown that this industry is a fast-growing part of the economy (Lapovsky & Larkin, 2009). With organizational performance being most successful with women in leadership positions within this industry and with the leadership style of women being most effectively suited for the nonprofit industry (Lapovsky & Larkin, 2009), nonprofits are best equipped to fulfill their social and advocacy mission, with women leaders at the helm.

With the majority of the population of people served by nonprofits consisting of people of color (Taylor, 2018), in particular African American females, it makes good business and mission sense to ensure that the leaders, in particular the executives, within this industry also look like the people whom they serve. However, the researcher continued to find African American females were mostly absent from the executive leadership roles of nonprofit organizations (Bascuas, 2013). Consequently, with the vast diversity and impact of this industry, in particular on the lives of African American women, ensuring that these leaders are given a seat at the executive leadership table, encourages a stronger and meaningful impact on society as a whole.

Consequently, this study sought to show how African American female executives made sense of their leadership experiences within this dynamic and changing industry, as well as, offered a voice to a group of leaders whose voice has been
historically silenced, diminished and ignored. By providing a platform for African American female nonprofit executives to live into their multifaceted identities, “organizations will benefit as a result of being able to draw from a deeper well of talent” (Sanchez-Hucles & Davis, 2010, p. 179), thus improving these leaders’ experiences within the workplace, increasing their numbers and ultimately benefiting communities.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

Topics

This literature review examined the following topics: Feminism, specifically Black Feminist Thought/Theory (BFT) as a guide in showing how African American female executives made sense of the intersection of multiple identities and leadership identity, African American Women Leadership, African American Women Executive Leadership identity and sensemaking in the context of nonprofit organizations. Ultimately, this study set out to shed light on how African American female executives made sense of their leadership journey and leadership identity.

Purpose

The purpose of this narrative inquiry was to explore African American female executives’ leadership experiences in the nonprofit industry. The central question guiding this study was: How do African American female executives make sense of their leadership experiences in the nonprofit industry in the United States?

Methods of the Literature Review

To begin the literature search, the researcher utilized the following databases: Articles Plus, ProQuest, ERIC, Ebscohost and Google Scholar. Search terms included: nonprofit female executive, nonprofit African American female executives, nonprofit leader identity, nonprofit African American female leader identity, Feminist theory in nonprofits, Black Feminist Thought/Theory (BFT) in nonprofits, sensemaking in organizations, sensemaking in nonprofits. The first searches yielded anywhere between 19,520 (nonprofit female executives) and 3,869 articles (nonprofit African American female executives). Literature was peer-reviewed and in the English language. The initial
search was not bounded by years, in order to capture a comprehensive listing of sources. The researcher ultimately bounded the results by these years (1990 to 2020) to ensure the foundational research related to Black Feminist thinking and current research were captured.

The remainder of this chapter is organized as follows: first, an overview of research on the topic of African American female leaders was presented. Within the discussion of African American female leaders, their leader identity within the context of Racial Identity Theory (RIT) and Feminist Theory, inclusive of Black Feminist Thought/Theory (BFT), was explored. After the discussion of these theories, the literature of African American female executives in leadership was explored. Next, research specific to African American female executives in the nonprofit industry was discussed, specifically how sensemaking impacted their executive leadership experiences. Lastly, the researcher concluded with a synthesis of the literature.

**African American Female Leaders**

Historically, there has been a disconnect between the female role and the title of leader, as society has been dominated by masculinity as being associated with being a leader, thus diminishing the perception of females being positively associated with being a leader (e.g., Eagly et al., 2003; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Eagly & Wood, 1991; Heilman et al., 1989; Schein, 1973). Also, some research has presented African Americans as being leaders who are not as effective as Whites, because negative stereotypes have overshadowed expectations related to leadership characteristics (Beatty, 1973; Ford et al., 1986; Greenhaus et al., 1990; Knight et al., 2003; Powell & Butterfield, 1997). With such leadership stereotypes as independence, aggression, competitiveness, and dominance
being pervasively masculine, when attached to minority groups, in particular African American females with their historical identities, society is less likely to view African American female leaders as having what it takes to truly be successful as leaders. Further, with research indicating that White men are typical leaders (Rosette et al., 2008), such an infusion of White masculinity leaves minority women--in particular African American female leaders at the bottom of the leadership ladder--further feeding into a perception that such minority female leaders are unlikely or unacceptable leaders. Specifically, as shared by the 2019 Report from Women in the Workplace, out of 100 men who are promoted to a manager role, only approximately 64 African American women are even hired.

While White men remain solidly positioned in the majority of executive leadership roles across sectors, the African American female executive narrative continues to speak to the underpinnings of institutionalized racism and discrimination as systems which keep racial minorities out of such roles. In particular, discrimination has been most harmful to women and African Americans (Banerjee et al., 2009). As African American women leaders have been historically categorized based upon their perceived identities in society based upon substandard images and roles in society, African American women leaders typically have to prove they are worthy of leadership, prior to being chosen to assume leadership roles (Byrd & Stanley, 2009).

Once a stereotype has been created and accepted within society, it ultimately becomes the lens through which many personal interactions and experiences are formed. Oftentimes, women are characterized as being “communal” (Bakan, 1966) and thus are seen as being kind, friendly, selfless, caring and emotional (Crawford, 2000). However,
because African American women are regularly labeled as the “Angry Black Woman,” professional African American females often have to temper and constantly moderate how they show up in the workplace, thus causing them to experience “bicultural stress” as defined by Ella Bell, professor at Tuck School of Business, as the requirement to conceal their real selves in the workplace (Hewlett, 2012). Such isolation and emotional strain create an insiders-only environment thus making African American females within corporate contexts feel like outsiders (Hewlett, 2012), despite the fact that African American female leaders possess high levels of ambition and aspiration (McGregor, 2015). Specifically, as posited by Maura Cheeks (2018), despite their high educational attainment, African American female leaders often feel exhausted and unable to truly bring their whole selves to work as other groups could. Roberts et al. (2018) purported, as shared by one African American female, that she is “forever exhausted by people thinking the reason I have the senior role I’m in is because I’m Black, not that I’m excellent” (p. 8). Consequently, in order to sustain leadership roles, African American women may need to “learn to cope, navigate, and survive a system of disempowering experiences” (Byrd & Stanley, 2009, p. 557). As shared by Roberts et al. (2018), African American female leaders often feel that they “tick a lot of boxes for people. They get a package of someone who’s female, who’s African- American, who has an MBA from an elite academic institution [and] there I am—the purple unicorn” (p. 8). As a result, despite their high educational attainment and experiences, the stresses imposed upon the African American female leader show that they truly do have unequal rights and opportunities within the workplace.
**Leader Identity**

Known as the originator of research related to identity (Gleason, 1983), Erik Erikson saw identity as a construct that could be experienced on a personal level as well as from being a participant of society (Hoare, 1991). According to Hoare (1991) Erikson’s identity construct was one of the first to “tie identity to social roles in the broader culture” (p. 47). In this respect, identity often encompasses a dual nature; one which is tied to social categories as well as tied to an “individual’s self-respect or dignity” (Fearon, 1999, p. 2). While there have been many and varied definitions of identity, such as “identity is people’s concepts of who they are, of what sort of people they are, and how they relate to others” (Fearon, 1999, p. 4) or “the desire for group distinction, dignity, and place within historically specific discourses (or frames of understanding) about the character, structure and boundaries of the polity and the economy” (Fearon, 1999, p. 5) or identity “references mutually constructed and evolving images of self and other” (Fearon, 1999, p. 5), Erikson’s foundational emphasis on identity as being about an individual having a personal identity and social identity was core to this study’s focus on how African American female executives made sense of their leadership experiences within the nonprofit industry.

According to DeRue et al. (2009), leader identity has been identified as one of the “most important predictors of effective leadership and career development” (p. 4). Leader Identity Theory (LIT) “conceptualizes identity as a relatively stable and enduring entity, yet driven by an underlying dynamic homeostasis operating continuously in a self-adjusting feedback loop” (Miscenko et al., 2017, p. 607). While previous research related to Leader Identity Theory centered on how individuals “engage in activities to create,
present, and sustain identities which are positive despite troublesome social conditions” (DeRue et al., 2009, p. 8) such as oppression, this study’s focus of Leader Identity was centered on “how individuals negotiate among different identities, such as between the personal and social identities or how individuals customize an identity to fit their evolving understanding of a setting” (DeRue et al., 2009, p. 8). Focused on the interconnected relationship between the individual’s self and their environment, a leader’s multiple identities, such as one’s gender, race and professional identities combine with their “individual relational and collective identities” (Ibarra et al., 2014, p. 3). Concerned with the varied roles that individuals put on within organizational settings and within society, Leader Identity Theory is a “complicated, interactive and adaptive process” (Ibarra et al., 2014, p. 2).

Validated through the literature, leaders often “possess multiple identities, each of which is associated with various roles and contexts” (Zheng & Muir, 2015, p. 630). As it relates to personal leader identity, being an African American female elicits particular connections to one’s gender, race and definition of self within the context of a White, male-dominated broader culture. Such a focus on personal leader identity requires an emphasis on how these women define themselves, their character (Fearon, 1999) and their position within society. Looking at the social identity of African American females, one finds this emphasis on personal leader identity ties to the social categories of “a group of people designated by a label (or labels)” (Fearon, 1999, p. 10).

African American female executives experience their roles and types of identities as intersecting and interconnected. For example, the women in this research study found themselves living into multiple roles and identities, such as the role of gender (female),
the role of race (African American), the role of professional (executive) and the roles of mother, sister, and even spouse all at the same time. Further, the literature posits that “meaning making, learning and identity development are all inextricably bound,” (Zheng & Muir, 2015, p. 631). While it is clear that African American females are bound to multiple intersecting realities related to their personal leader and social identities, they often find themselves in undiscovered territories within their workplaces, whereby they are forced to “contend with stereotypical images, form undeveloped roles, and demonstrate special dimensions of competence” (Bell, 1990, p.460).

**Black Feminist Thought/Theory (BFT)**

In discussing ways to cope and to ultimately overcome the burdens of injustices in the workplace and thus leadership, a focus on the theoretical underpinnings of Feminist Theory set out to help form the groundwork for how African American women bridge the gap between their race and gender in society. According to Rampton (2008), while recent research has broken Feminism down into four waves; first-wave (between the 19th and early 20th centuries), second-wave (during the 1960s), third-wave (during the 1990s) and fourth-wave (during the 2010s), it was during the second wave of Feminism whereby Black Feminism was born, as a response to the sexist behaviors of the civil rights movement and racist behaviors of the feminist movement (Collins, 1986). Because the early White middle-class feminist leaders did not take on the struggles of African American women, poor women and women of color as their own (Collins, 2000), the need for African American women to own their issues, use their own voices to address their issues and create their own platforms for bringing their experiences to the forefront was created (Collins, 2000). It was on this premise that in particular Black Feminist
Thought/Theory (BFT) helped to lay a solid foundation for a pathway to African American females gaining leadership experiences.

Since the early 1800s, there has been an emphasis on prioritizing the African American female’s voice in society. Specifically, as shared by Maria Stewart (1831) in her pamphlet *Religion and the Pure Principles of Morality, the Sure Foundation on which We Must Build*, she called upon “the fair daughters of Africa” (Collins, 2002, p. 1), to rally in support of one another. This shows evidence that African American women have been actively engaged in the feminist movement since its beginnings. Consequently, this emphasis on bringing voice to the African American female’s lived experiences within society gave rise to Black Feminist Thought/Theory (BFT), which focused on “formulating and rearticulating the distinctive, self-defined standpoint of African American women” (Collins, 1989, p. 750). Through BFT, African American women were given a stage upon which to create their own manner to define African American womanhood and subsequently define the worth of their contributions (Collins, 1986). Examples of this experience of self-definition include Alice Walker's 1982 novel, *The Color Purple*, and Ntozake Shange's 1978 choreopoem, *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide*. These literary works present powerful declarations of the need for African American females to self-define and self-value. For African American females, there was an experience of always feeling as though you were an outsider, "living as we did—on the edge—we developed a particular way of seeing reality. We looked both from the outside in and from the inside out. . . we understood both" (Collins, 1986, p. S15). Often experiencing daily life as an outsider, moving between diverse identities based upon their environments and contexts, African American female
executives often find themselves in mutually influencing experiences whereby their personal and professional values intersect. In the late 1980’s, African American historian, E. Frances White (1984) expounded upon this experience when she stated “Black women's ideas have been honed at the juncture between movements for racial and sexual equality, and contends that Afro-American women have been pushed by their marginalization in both arenas to create Black feminism”(Collins, 1986, p. S15).

The early trailblazers of Black Feminist Thought/Theory (BFT) saw the need to capture the lived experiences of the African American female as a way to empower them, recognize their struggles of oppression (hooks, 1984) and celebrate their uniqueness. Centered upon “portraying African American women as self-defined, self-reliant individuals confronting race, gender, and class oppression” (Collins, 1990, p. 553), this distinctive theory offered a dynamic pathway for African American females to speak their truths and share their experiences about the realities of being a African American female executive in the nonprofit industry.

African American females are uniquely positioned to be impacted by defining who they are in terms of their interconnected statuses related to race, class and gender, as “since slavery, they have struggled individually and in groups, spontaneously and in formal organizations, to eradicate the multiple injustices that they and their communities face” (Danto, 2004, p. 1). Speaking directly to the intersecting realities of the African American female in society, Anna Julia Cooper (1892) in her essay, A Voice from the South by a Black woman of the South, emphasized the multiple identities of oppression that are experienced by the African American female (Gines, 2011). Similarly, one can see continued connection between these intersections within Black Feminist
Thought/Theory (BFT) in particular, as Elise Johnson McDougald (1925) shares in *The Struggle of Negro Women for Sex and Race Emancipation*, it was clear that the intersections of race, gender and class oppression were imposed upon the African American female within society (Gines, 2011). Clearly the realities of the intersecting identities of African American females continues to show up in their daily lived experiences. As shared in an article by Gines (2011), “the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism or sexism, [thus] any analysis that does not take intersectionality into account cannot sufficiently address the particular manner in which Black women are [oppressed]” (p. 278). Further, Patricia Hill Collins extends the relevance of intersectionality in the African American female’s lived experience as she articulates that the realities of multiple oppressive elements within intersectionality (race, class, gender, sexuality, nationality, ethnicity, age) “cannot be reduced to one fundamental type, and that oppressions work together in producing injustice” (Gines, 2011, p. 279).

Focusing on the identity of being African American and female are central to discovering how African American females make sense of their experiences as executives within the nonprofit industry. Recognizing this, Identity Theory was a central theory in this study. In defining identity, this study focuses on identity as based upon the “social categories in which an individual claims membership as well as the personal meaning associated with those categories” (Shields, 2008, p. 1). With its foundations traced back to George Herbert Mead (1934), Identity Theory offers a “framework underwriting the analyses of numerous sociological and social psychological issues” (Stryker & Burke, 2000, p. 285). As spelled out by Mead, "society shapes self, shapes
social behavior” (Stryker & Burke, 2000, p. 285) and specifically that, “the self is multifaceted, made up of interdependent and independent, mutually reinforcing and conflicting parts” (Stryker & Burke, 2000, p. 286). In a culture that has been subjected to oppression and discrimination throughout history, identity theory’s focus on the “stability in identities and their salience across time and situations” (Stryker & Burke, 2000, p. 286) offers African American females a vehicle through which they can share their lived experiences of executive leadership within the nonprofit industry.

**Racial Identity Theory (RIT)**

African American female identity consists of “multiple oppressions [that] are not each suffered separately but rather as a single, synthesized experience” (Smith, 2013, p. 3). Knowing such, this study utilized Racial Identity Theory (RIT) specifically, as a theoretical framework for exploring African American female executive identity. As outlined by Shelton & Sellers (2000), there are two paths of Racial Identity Theory:

“one path focuses on racial identity as a personality trait and is concerned more with how culture shapes this trait [and the] other path focuses on racial identity as an example of a universal social process associated with group membership, with little concern for the unique experience of being African American” (p. 28).

Known as the “underground approach,” this path of Racial Identity Theory identifies that “African Americans’ cultural experience is not only a consequence of their stigmatized status within this society, but also is a function of their particular historical and cultural experiences in America and Africa” (Shelton & Sellers, 2000, p. 29). This helps to expose that the daily experiences that African Americans have within society are
framed from a historically oppressed and prejudiced context. This unique racial identity approach offers African American female leaders in the nonprofit industry, a space to define what it truly means to be African American and be connected to one’s “attitudes and beliefs regarding the African American community” (Shelton & Sellers, 2000, p. 29).

The second path, known as the “mainstream approach” has been geared toward a much more comparative model, which has been “concerned primarily with the processes resulting in group identities and the impact of group identities on individuals’ attributions and behaviors at the situational level” (Shelton & Sellers, 2000, p. 30). While this approach provides some context into the African American experience, it has often been limiting in its over-generalization across all African American individuals, hyper-focused on the experience of oppression and often too linear (Shelton & Sellers, 2000). This study’s focus was on the Underground approach as it set out to help explore what life was like being an African American female executive within the nonprofit industry.

In evaluating the lived experiences of African American female leaders within the nonprofit industry through Black Feminist Thought/Theory (BFT) and Racial Identity Theory, this study set out to provide insight into how these women made sense of their leadership journeys within their organizational settings. The process of sensemaking facilitates people making sense of the world around them inclusive of their own actions, reactions and behaviors relative to an organizational setting. In particular, the social nature of sensemaking offers African American female leaders the opportunity to examine their interactions and relationships with others as they make sense of their leadership experiences in such an isolated context. Ultimately, this study expects to make a valuable contribution to Black Feminist Thought/Theory (BFT) in the nonprofit
industry in particular, as a majority of the literature related to African American female leaders has been focused on academic settings.

**African American Female Executives**

With the one African American female executive of the S&P 500 (McGregor, 2015) having recently stepped down from her CEO role at Xerox and the literature offering distinct illustrations of the leadership identity of African American female executives in for-profit corporations (Warner, 2014), higher education (Green, 2008; Jackson et al., 2014; Madsen, 2012), and even nursing (Wright, 2012), the fact remains that minorities, in particular African American females, are nearly nonexistent in executive leadership positions in nonprofits (Ho, 2017). Consequently, such an absence demonstrates how African American females continue to be excluded from attaining the role of executive across industries (Byrd, 2009).

Research from the nonprofit firm Catalyst (2001) found that 1.3 percent of executives and senior level managers in S&P 500 companies are African American women, 4.7 percent are women of color, and 21.8 percent are White women. However, in comparison to African American men or White women, African American women leaders were associated with higher leader status (Livingston et al., 2012). Similarly, “African American career women who displayed dominance, another characteristic that is consistent with typical leader characteristics, were shown to be more likeable and more hirable than identically-described White women or African American men” (Hall et al., 2012). In looking at leader identity, research supports that if a leader sees themselves as a leader, they often begin to behave as a leader. Specifically, Day & Harrison (2007) state “a leader identity refers to the sub-component of one's identity that relates to being a
leader or how one thinks of oneself as a leader. Identity is important for leaders because it grounds them in understanding who they are, their major goals and objectives, and their personal strengths and limitations” (p. 365). Further, the motivation that comes from believing in oneself as a leader and acting as a leader encourages the development of leadership behaviors, skills and abilities (Day & Harrison, 2007). However, while the literature offers examples of White women holding executive leadership roles in the nonprofit industry (Managance Consulting, 2004), the lack of African American female executive leadership representation is disconcerting. Unfortunately, while African American females are often more likely to strive for top leadership roles and believe they can succeed in powerful positions (McGregor, 2015), such as the role of CEO/ED, and thus show their eagerness to take charge, they often feel stalled in their career paths (McGregor, 2015).

With the term “Glass Ceiling” being attributed to “an intangible barrier within a hierarchy that prevents women or minorities from obtaining upper-level positions” (merriam-webster.com), there is an even more inhibiting leadership experience entitled the “Concrete Ceiling” which is “described as an additional rung in the ladder representing the specific challenges of African American women in the workplace” (Johnson, 2015, p. 408). This “Concrete Ceiling” reflects the historical barriers and hassles that block African American women from securing leadership roles in the workplace. Consequently, research supports that the backgrounds and racial struggles of African American woman were closely tied to their success (or lack thereof) in the workplace (Gaetane et al., 2009). With such apparent impenetrable barriers to their executive leadership opportunities, it is clear why “the percentage of African American
women in the top two tiers of leadership are substantially lower in comparison to their counterparts” (Johnson, 2015, p. 412). Further, the literature may point to the fact that the playing field of leadership opportunities for African American female executives, may be strategically restrictive “from permitting them to flourish” (Johnson, 2015, p. 412).

**African American Female Executives in the Nonprofit Industry**

There has been a variety of literature related to African American women in such fields as education and religion, yet there remains a dearth of literature related to African American women in leadership positions across multiple economic sectors. What continues to be evident is that minority women remain underrepresented in leadership positions. African American female executives specifically, see the leadership positions in the nonprofit industry consistently going to White men (Ho, 2017), with only 1.56% of the total executive/senior level positions being held by African American females (EEOC, 2015). In looking at the nonprofits with budgets of $50 million or more, a mere 18 percent of CEOs are women, and women CEOs within the nonprofit industry consistently earn on average 6 to 23 percent less than their male colleagues (McLean, 2015), based on the size of the nonprofits’ budget. Further, research shows that while minority women in general are left out of the executive leadership roles and while African American women who combined represent 24.3 million or 14% of women in the United States (Tarr, 2018), only 1.5 percent of African American women (7.6 percent of the private sector workforce) are executives (McGregor, 2016).

Looking deeper into nonprofit leadership, one finds that nearly a quarter of nonprofit boards lack a single person of color (McKeever, 2020) and the percentage of people of color on nonprofit boards remains stagnant for 18 years at a mere 8% (Dubose,
Additionally, research shows that nearly 84% of the leaders on nonprofit boards being White (Dubb, 2018), board chairs being White (Dubb, 2018) and CEOs also being White, thus leaving women of color, in particular African American women, poorly represented (BoardSource, 2015). Within the nonprofit industry, not only are people of color expected to secure additional skills, training and education for executive level positions (Biu, 2019), but African American female executives are also faced with the two barriers of race and gender which continue to form that ‘concrete wall,’ behind which they make sense of their executive leadership identity in this industry. Bound by these interconnected forces, African American female executives within the nonprofit industry continue to face an uphill battle in securing and maintaining executive leadership positions. Thus, for these women, by embracing their leadership journeys, they have the opportunity to “mak[e] sense of [their] social world, and further shar[e] that ‘sense’ with others” (Turner, 1999, pp. 78-79), who may seek to follow in their paths.

For African American female executives within the nonprofit industry, maintaining themselves within a work environment which is often institutionalized with racism, often lends itself to them feeling “isolated, misunderstood, misrepresented, and missing in action feel[ing] invisible and hypervisible at the same time,” (Boylorn, 2014, p. 3) due to such diminishing and isolating work environments. However, through the use of sensemaking, these women can be empowered to create the work environments which can guide who they are, who they choose to become and assist African American women with attempting to “reconcile the past with the present and to project forward to the future with the hope that positive change would be forthcoming” (Bird, 2007, p. 316). In exploring the lived experiences of African American female
executives within the nonprofit industry, they can come to understand their own “individual experience [within organizations] and social interaction” (Robichaud et al., 2004, p. 619.) Sensemaking, as specifically connected to one’s unique identities, reveals the “capacity to generate meaning over time so as to hold past, present, and future together” (Benhabib, 1999, p. 353). Further, from the process of sensemaking within the nonprofit industry, sensemaking is not simply about the African American female executive interpreting her organizational leadership world and identity, but is equally about her creating her own organizational leadership world and identity.

Sensemaking

From the “founding father” of sensemaking, one finds that Weick (1995) conceptualized sensemaking in alignment with seven key principles:

1. “Sensemaking is grounded in identity construction. When individuals collectively select a certain interpretation of some experience, they are at the same time selecting a particular identity for themselves.

2. Sensemaking is retrospective. Although individuals may consider possible interpretations of anticipated events, it is not until the event occurs that individuals collectively make sense or commit to a particular interpretation of the event.

3. Sensemaking is enactive of sensible environments. The context or environment is created through the give and take between individuals’ abilities to enact the environment they face through their actions and interpretations and the constraints that the environment places on them.

4. Sensemaking is social. Through communication individuals collectively come to agree on a meaning for understanding experiences.

5. Sensemaking is ongoing. Because individuals constantly have new experiences, they must constantly make sense of them; even repetitious experiences need interpretation concerning their consistency.

6. Sensemaking is focused on and by extracted cues. Because of the impracticality of considering all the information about an experience, individuals focus on particular aspects of it (extracted cues) to make generalizations about the whole experience.
7. Sensemaking is driven by plausibility rather than accuracy. The meaning assigned to an experience has to seem reasonable, but it does not have to meet some objective sense of truth to be accepted” (p.17)

With Weick providing these foundational tenets of sensemaking, this process continues to leave researchers searching for a way to define this process. As shared by Klein et al. (2006), sensemaking can often be experienced as a “motivated, continuous effort to understand connections (which can be among people, places, and events) in order to anticipate their trajectories and act effectively (p. 71).” As a social process, Klein et al. (2006) see sensemaking as an ongoing process acquiring, reflecting and acting within particular contexts. Such an active process, provides a manner through which individuals consistently and almost innately incorporate their experiences into how they “make sense” and come to understand the world in which they find themselves (Klein et al., 2006). For theorist, Brenda Dervin, sensemaking is an engaging and holistic process, whereby learning is at its core (Kolko, 2010). Specifically for Dervin, sensemaking “is personal and contingent on experience, that substantiates learning, that takes place continually and forever, and is fundamentally based on each participant’s perspective or point of view” (Kolko, 2010, p. 2) Consequently, for the African American female executive, allowing them to engage in such a personal and often shared process of learning allows this process of sensemaking to incorporate the fullness of their knowledge, experiences, emotions, and prior experiences as it relates to their executive leadership experiences (Kolko, 2010).

**Sensemaking in Nonprofit Organizations**

While sensemaking has not been found within the framework of unique organizational contexts, “such as corporate social responsibility, computer mediated
communication, and volunteering” (Kramer, 2016, p. 9), Weick’s approach to sensemaking brings together individuals and organizations and looks at how they both impact each other in making sense of their environment. By weaving together the individual within the context of their work environment, the interpretation of meaning making becomes a much more holistic and integrated experience (Helms, Thurlow, & Mills, 2010). Such a process can be treated as reciprocal exchanges between actors (Enactment) and their environments (Ecological Change) that are made meaningful (Selection) and preserved (Retention) (Weick et al., 2005). Within the context of the nonprofit organization, whereby individuals are gathered together around common social, educational and advocacy goals, through the process of sensemaking, nonprofit organizations can come to grasp the interconnected nature between people, situations and experiences. This integrated experience facilitates an “internal and reflective activity, where one is actively trying to solve a specific and contained problem, but also as an external and communal activity, where a group of people are trying to solve multiple problems in pursuit of larger, organizational goals” (Klein et al., 2006, p.71). The nonprofit industry, which gives voice, resources and services to often underserved populations, can use the process of sensemaking as a way to shape the “language, talk, and communication” (Weick et al., 2005, p. 409) of often silenced communities. Further in this service-based context, such a greatly cooperative, shared and communal process of sensemaking can enhance the impact and reach of this industry. Consequently, bringing together the lived experiences of how African American female executives make sense of their leadership experiences within the nonprofit industry, will help to expand the application of this unique process called sensemaking within this industry.
Literature Review Summary

Being historically positioned within society’s stereotypical African American identity, through sensemaking, the African American female executive is empowered to come to know who she is, who she wants to be and how to navigate her leadership experiences. Often having to tear down the barriers and obstacles put into place to hinder their leadership paths, African American female leaders must combat the challenges of having to come to understand their realm of control, within dominant organizational settings. Not only is the lack of leadership opportunities for African American females within the nonprofit industry not improving, according to Bell and Nkomo (2001), African American women are forced to make sense of their leadership experiences from behind “concrete walls.” Further, facing the intersecting realities of being African American, female and a leader requires these African American female executives to navigate their leadership contexts by embracing key qualities to empower them to make sense of their leadership experiences within the nonprofit industry. Such qualities as emotional intelligence, self-awareness, and critical cognition of what is and what is not (Ancona, 2012) help to form a consistent and meaningful lens through which African American female executives own their leadership realities. Although the inequities faced by many minority women in leadership roles is a reality (Eagly & Chin, 2010), the historic and institutionalized racially-focused stereotypes forced upon African American women within society and the workplace, is a daily journey for which these women have become accustomed to endure.
Chapter 3: Research Methods
Overview of Methodology

The purpose of this narrative inquiry was to explore how African American female executives in the nonprofit industry made sense of their leadership experiences. Specifically, through the qualitative research method of narrative inquiry, this study endeavored to gain an understanding for each participant’s unique voice as they told, retold and shared their leadership journeys as African American female nonprofit executives. The question that guided this study was: How do African American female executives make sense of their leadership experiences in the nonprofit industry?

Conducting this study within the context of a research philosophy assisted with bringing awareness to the researcher’s source, nature and development of knowledge (Bajpai, 2011). This context is divided into two specific research approaches: in support of positivism and thus quantitative methods and those in support of constructivist and interpretivist approaches and thus qualitative methods. One’s ontology (way of being, reality and making sense of the world) and one’s epistemology (how to understand knowledge) have a direct impact on the research process. There are two distinct types of ontologies: Objectivist, which indicates that social phenomena and their meanings have an existence that is independent of social actors (Bryman, 2012) versus Subjectivist, which indicates that social phenomena and their meanings are continuously being accomplished by social actors (Bryman, 2012). This study was based on the Subjectivist Ontological approach, as its research process focused on people being people and thus gaining an understanding for how they make individual meaning of their leadership experiences.
There are four distinct types of epistemologies: Pragmatism, which is centered on practical applied research, combining diverse perspectives to aid in interpreting data; Positivism, which is centered on causality and law-like details and is generally quantitative in nature; Realism, which is centered on explaining within a context or contexts and Interpretivism, which is centered on smaller samples, details of a situation, a reality behind these details, subjective meanings, motivating actions and are generally qualitative in nature (Saunders et al., 2012). This study utilized an Interpretivist epistemology which explored how gaining access to reality was accomplished through social structures such as language, consciousness, shared meanings, and instruments (Myers, 2008). Specifically, through interpretivism, the researcher engaged as a detective who was interested in gaining an understanding of the complexities around how and why African American female executives made sense of their leadership experiences within the nonprofit industry.

The research methodology for this study was narrative inquiry. Narrative inquiry “is an ongoing hermeneutic or interpretive process, [whereby] interpretation starts immediately when one story is selected out of any number of other possible stories, and it continues during the entire research process” (Moen, 2006, p.62) According to Moen (2006), “the final narrative opens for a wide range of interpretations by others who read and hear about the report” (p.62). Narrative inquiry is an interpretive methodological approach found within the social sciences (McAlpine, 2016).

Narrative inquiry can also be found across disciplines of sociology, organizational studies, gender studies and education and “is closely linked to life history and biography, because like them it involves telling stories, recounting – accounting for – how
individuals make sense of events and actions in their lives with themselves as the agents of their life” (McAlpine, 2016, p.34). Narratives “provide a window into the process of identity construction” (McAlpine, 2016, p.33). According to Moen (2006), in narrative inquiry the individual is “connected to her or his social, cultural and institutional setting [thus] narratives capture both the individual and the context” (p.60). Riessman (2008) highlights that narrative inquiry findings generally refer to a unique singular example versus providing generalizations across examples. Narratives offer participants an opportunity to put their lived experiences into sequences (Floersch, et al, 2010) and in general “narratives are the central mechanism for meaning making” (Floersch, et al, 2010, p.412). Consequently, narrative research is an examination of “how human beings experience the world, and narrative researchers collect these stories and write narratives of experience” (Moen, 2006, p.56). Through the construction and recounting of narratives, individuals form and re-form who they have been, are presently and hope to become. Narrative inquiry focuses on the experiences of one particular individual who recounts stories of their life and uncovers the significance and meaning of each of their learned and lived experiences.

This methodology, narrative inquiry, was chosen as a way for the researcher to collect, describe, tell and write narratives regarding each participant’s unique experience (Clandinin & Connelly, 1990). This approach, versus phenomenology, which seeks to describe the essence of a phenomenon, or case study, which focuses on a particular time/place to inform a problem, or grounded theory, which focuses on developing a particular theory, offered the researcher the context through which a true exploration of how African American female executives in the nonprofit industry made sense of and
shared their experiences related to their leadership journeys. At its core, narrative inquiry provided the space for the researcher to analyze the participant stories and then re-story them into a particular chronological sequence. Ultimately, narrative inquiry is “stories lived and told” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p.20). This method aligned with the research purpose and question, as narrative inquiry allowed the researcher to gain an understanding of how the executive leadership experiences of African American females unfolded within the context of their unique social environments and thus highlighted how these women experienced this reality.

**Research Procedures**

**Site**

This research study was conducted primarily via zoom meetings, due to how geographically dispersed the participants and the researcher were across the United States. In-person interviews were conducted with any participants who were easily accessible to the researcher via car. While the researcher was located in Northern, Virginia, the participants were located throughout the United States.

**Population and Sample**

This study’s population consisted of African American female executives in the nonprofit industry. According to Guiseppi (2018) of the Executive Career Brand, those individuals at the C-Suite or C-Level, President or General Manager constitute executive level positions. In the nonprofit industry, the title Executive Director is seen as an equal to the title of CEO in a for-profit organization (Leonard, 2019).
In reviewing the literature related to sample size for narrative inquiry research, Huber and Whelan (1999) recommended one or two, Birmingham (2010) recommended two and Smith and Sparkes (2006) recommended 14 participants. Being prescriptive of an ideal sample size is challenging due to such factors as “the type of data to be collected; number of participants; duration of researcher-participant relationships; number of contacts with participants; and size of data to be sampled for the analysis” (Lal et al., 2012, p.10). While the researcher engaged with participants until data saturation or the point where enough data had been collected to reproduce the study (O’Reilly & Parker, 2012; Walker, 2012) or where no supplementary information was achieved (Guest et al., 2006) ultimately, due to the complexities of and diverse range related to sample size, this study engaged nine (9) participants.

Through the use of Purposeful sampling (selection), this study deliberately selected particular settings, persons or activities “to provide information that was particularly relevant to [research] questions and goals” (Maxwell, 2013, p.97). There are five key goals to Purposeful sampling (selection):

1) achieving adequate representation of the settings, individuals or activities of the population,

2) representation of the complete scope of variety of the population,

3) intentionally selecting individuals who are key for testing theories,

4) establishing comparisons to shed light on why differences evolved between individuals, and
5) deliberately selecting individuals who will be most suited to help solve your research question.

This research study focused primarily on goals one, two and five, as goal #3, testing for theories and goal #4, comparisons and correlations, are much more quantitative in nature, which is not the intent of this study. Specifically, the sampling criteria most relevant for this study was: 1) African American Females; 2) who had served as an Executive; 3) within the Nonprofit Industry. As there is a gap in the literature related to African American female executives within the nonprofit industry, the study relied on snowball sampling in order to achieve the desired sample size of nine (9) participants. Snowball sampling is a unique data sampling technique to gain access to often vulnerable and more impenetrable social groups (Atkinson & Flint, 2001). Specifically, it is a technique whereby, one participant provides the researcher with the name of another potential participant, who subsequently provides the name of a third, and etc. (Vogt, 1999). For this narrative inquiry, which was qualitative, explorative and descriptive in nature, snowball sampling offered helpful benefits (Hendricks, et al., 1992), such as a manner to quickly find participants of a population which was hard to reach, as well as, discovery of narrowly defined characteristics of a population that is often underserved or vulnerable (Sadler, et al., 2010).

**Data Collection Methods**

The qualitative interview process is divided into three main types: semi-structured, structured and unstructured. This research study focused specifically on semi-structured interviews which are often scheduled far in advance and at a particular time and location. In-depth interviews are the most common semi-structured interviews
conducted, as they provide the space for open-ended questions as well as questions which materialize from the conversation between the researcher and participant (DiCiccio-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). According to DiCiccio-Bloom & Crabtree (2006), these in-depth interviews facilitate the researcher to dig deeper into the social and personal experiences of the participant. Specifically, for qualitative research, Seidman (1991) believes these interviews are relevant in exploring the meaning of life stories.

According to Seidman (2013), in-depth interviews with a focus on three separate and distinct interviews, create a space for both the researcher and the participant to discover the lived experiences of the participant. For the first interview, the researcher would focus on the life history as shared by the participant, which lays out the context of the lived experience (approximately 90 minutes long). The second interview is concentrated on obtaining the specific details of the lived experiences (90 minutes). The third interview is centered on the participant reflecting on the meaning of their experience (Seidman, 2013). For this study, due to the exclusivity (often restricted access and limited time/scheduling availability) of this population of nonprofit African American female executives, a modified version of Seidman’s three-interview series was utilized, which afforded the researcher an opportunity to maximize the available time of this high-demand population. This modified version merged the first and second interviews as a background gathering process and the final interview focused on reflecting on the meaning making. Also, in order to protect the integrity of the interview process, Seidman (1991) recommends maintaining the logic of the interview, which allows a balance between openness of sharing by participants and a focus on the structure of the process (Seidman, 2000), in order to facilitate sense-making. The in-depth interview process
encourages the development of rapport, relationship and reflection between the interviews. Ultimately for Seidman, in-depth interviews are about asking participants to “reconstruct their experience and to explore their meaning” (Seidman, 2013, p. 94). Further, interviews matter because they allow us to take “an interest in other individuals’ stories because they are of worth” (2012, pp. 8-9), and as a researcher, Seidman (2012) believes that “[we] interview because [we] [are] interested in other people’s stories” (p. 7).

In utilizing in-depth semi-structured interviews, the researcher posed the same topics to each participant, however, the manner in which the individual conversations unfolded was different (Roulston, 2019). The uniqueness of each participant’s lived experience was captured through the follow-up questions which were generated as a result of what the participant shared. Patton (2015) proposes that the researcher consider the participant’s past, current and future lived experiences, as questions are being devised. Through utilization of this study’s interview guide the researcher posed questions which encouraged the participants to tell their stories which covered various periods of time. While interview guides can range from structured to more free-flowing and thus unstructured, the focus of the interview guide surrounds covering broad themes which facilitate engaging in a conversation about topics and issues relevant and meaningful to the researcher. Ultimately, the guides “serve the same purpose, which is to ensure the same thematic approach is applied during the interview” (Qu, & Dumay, 2011, p. 3.3). This study’s interview protocol can be found in Appendix B.
Data Analysis

Qualitative research positions the researcher as the instrument, whereby the researcher’s “eyes and ears are the tools used to gather information and to make sense of what is going on” (Maxwell, 2015, p. 88). The process of determining what is going on and thus analyzing the data from a study begins promptly after the researcher has concluded the initial interview with a participant and data analysis is continually maintained throughout the researcher-participant relationship (Maxwell, 2015). Leaning on the works of Riessman (2008), analysis encourages storytelling to facilitate meaning making and further “reflects and respects participant’s ways of organizing meaning in their lives” (p. 169).

This study focused on the thematic nature of the lived experiences of African American female executives in the nonprofit industry. Through thematic narrative analysis, the researcher focused on “the ‘told’ rather than the aspects of ‘telling’” (Riessman, 2008, p.54). In analyzing data in this study, the researcher began with breaking interview text down into sections (Esin, 2011). Once these sections (i.e. paragraphs or sentences) were divided, then they were evaluated as their own unit of analysis. This inductive coding of the data allowed the researcher to uncover unique themes (i.e., thematic analysis) and mark and combine the themes in relation to the study’s theoretical and conceptual frameworks (Esin, 2011). According to Esin (2011), there are four stages in applying a thematic analysis:

1) Choose subtexts/segments of the interview transcript which are related to the research question
2) Define thematic categories across the chosen subtext, which can involve “reading the selected subtexts multiple times and defining the themes that emerge from the readings (p.108)”

3) Divide the narrative content (i.e. sentences, words) into categories

4) Finalize conclusions which involve using the narratives “to describe the meanings in the content of the narrative text” (p.108)

For this study, the researcher read the interview transcript for initial recollection of the interview; then read the transcript again to identify codes (Merriam, 2009); then the researcher read the transcript a third time for identification of categories (as mentioned above) and continued to revisit the transcript for the sorting, comparing and coding of themes (Creswell, 1998). This process facilitated a thorough review of each interview transcript, which according to Webster & Mertova (2007) encouraged a more holistic review, which is common for narrative inquiry. Specifically, through thematic narrative analysis, the researcher hoped to shed light on how the participant journeyed through time, tying relationships between experiences (Riessman, 2008).

Further, through the process of journaling, as a reflective way to “record personal thoughts, daily experiences, and evolving insights,” (Hiemstra, 2001, p. 19) the researcher was able to immediately document and reflect on the participant’s lived experiences post each interview and thus develop their own perspective as their own process of learning about the experience (Hiemstra, 2001). As “the way we give meaning to the world” (Kolb, 1984, p. 147), such reflective journaling provided the bridge to see connections between the sharing of the lived experiences. Consequently, thematic narrative analysis connects “stories told by research participants (which are themselves
interpretive), interpretive accounts developed by an investigator based on interviews and fieldwork observations (a story about stories), and even the narrative a reader constructs after engaging with the participant’s and investigator’s narratives” (Riessman, 2008, p. 6). Ultimately through thematic narrative analysis, a researcher is able to uncover discernable themes and examples of living and/or behavior (Aronson, 1995).

**Trustworthiness**

Narrative inquiry, although diligent in coding for meaningful themes within the context of the research question(s), has often been questioned for its thoroughness and value (Loh, 2013). Consequently, with a reputation for lacking credibility, in order to elevate its status, a thorough incorporation of trust and quality review has to be interwoven into this methodological process (Loh, 2013, p. 11). As influential and respected qualitative voices on trustworthiness, Lincoln and Guba (1985) identified in their work, *Naturalistic Inquiry*, that trustworthiness in qualitative research takes the place of such terms of validity, reliability and generalizability (Loh, 2013) in quantitative research. For establishing trustworthiness, Lincoln & Guba (1985) created the below commonly cited criteria to be used in the qualitative research field.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criteria</th>
<th>Techniques</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1) Prolonged engagement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2) Persistent observation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3) Triangulation (sources, methods, investigators)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4) Peer debriefing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5) Negative case analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6) Referential adequacy (archiving of data)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7) Member checks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Credibility (internal validity)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transferability (external validity)</td>
<td>8) Thick description</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dependability (reliability)</td>
<td>9) Overlap methods (Triangulation of methods)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>10) Dependability audit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- examining the process of the inquiry (how data was collected; how data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>was kept; accuracy of data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confirmability (objectivity)</td>
<td>11) Confirmability audit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- examines the product to attest that the findings, interpretations &amp;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>recommendations are supported by data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All 4 criteria</td>
<td>12) Reflexive journal (about self &amp; method)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
When trustworthiness is carried out in thoughtful and intentional ways, it creates an ethical and moral act of authenticity to participants “where multiple voices or multivoicedness is allowed to flourish” (Moss, 2004, p. 363). Ultimately, trustworthiness encourages the researcher to share all meaningful steps of the process and include each unique perspective of the participants (Moss, 2004).

Known as the most crucial element of trustworthiness, *credibility* is centered on having assurance and certainty in the truth of the study and consequently its results (Polit & Beck, 2014). The intent of credibility on a practical scale involves knowing that the procedures and standards utilized in the study were in alignment with the particular qualitative approach (Connelly, 2016). For example, this narrative inquiry study was conducted similar to other narrative inquiry studies. Specifically, through Seidman’s modified three-interview series, the researcher participated in prolonged interactions with the participants, member-checking, and reflective journaling (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Through the technique of member checking, which has been “defined as a quality control process by which a researcher seeks to improve the accuracy, credibility and validity of what has been recorded during a research interview,” (Harper, & Cole, 2012, p.1) the researcher reaffirmed the participant’s conversation and subsequently inquired with the participant related to the accuracy of what the researcher captured. Through reflective journaling, the researcher was able to reflect on/record elements of self-awareness related to their own behaviors, emotions and learnings shared by the participants. Ultimately the goal of member checking is to get the participants’ agreement or disagreement related to how well the summaries reflected the participant’s “views, feelings, and experiences, and
if accuracy and completeness are affirmed, then the study is said to have credibility” (Harper, & Cole, 2012, p. 2).

Focused on “the informants and their story without saying this is everyone’s story,” (Connelly, 2016, p. 436), transferability is determined by the degree to which the results are beneficial to individuals in varied environments, where ultimately applicability of the information shared is determined by each individual reader (Polit & Beck, 2014). Further, transferability is strengthened through qualitative research’s focus on thick, rich, detailed narratives related to “the context, location, and people studied, and by being transparent about analysis” (Connelly, 2016, p. 436). This rich data-collection process as captured through the use of the semi-structured and modified version of Seidman’s three-interview process for this narrative inquiry, provided the researcher with the medium through which to capture the lived experiences of African American female executives within the nonprofit industry, as their told, retold and shared stories were brought to life.

Dependability refers to the stability of the data over time and over the conditions of the study (Polit & Beck, 2014). In order to prove dependability, Lincoln and Guba (1985) recommended a practice known as inquiry audit. Similar to peer-debriefings, these audits are performed by a researcher, external to the research process, who assesses both the process and product of the research study. The goal of dependability is to validate the accuracy of the process and determine whether or not the findings, interpretations and results are validated by the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). For this study, the researcher collaborated with fellow researchers to validate the flow of this narrative inquiry and its ultimate findings as being dependable.
The neutrality and consistency in the extent to which the findings could be repeated, refer to the confirmability of the study. Lincoln and Guba (1985) recommended in order to prove *confirmability*, methodological memos and audit trails are conducted. Described as the “transparent description of the research steps taken from the start of a research project to the development and reporting of findings,” (Amankwaa, 2016, p.122) an audit trail is maintained as a way to validate what was done during the project. Such detailed analyses are helpful in avoiding biases in the research (Connelly, 2016). The researcher documented the research process/steps through the audit-trail process as shared within the context of the data analysis process.

**Human Participation & Ethical Considerations**

The duty of a researcher is first and foremost to the research participants (Seidman, 2013). With Seidman’s modified three-interview series of data collection, the researcher and the participant met, engaged in thoughtful conversations, active listening and reflection on lived experiences. These touchpoints offered intimate exchanges, which placed the participant and researcher in vulnerable situations. It was in the spirit of protecting the participant and their shared experiences that this study adhered to the ethics of informed consent. Through this process, it was critical that the participant was made aware of seven key elements:

1) “Invitation to participate. This shared the what, who, how, how long and for whom the study was based.

2) Risks. This shared the vulnerabilities and risks of the sharing process.
3) Rights. This articulated an intentional statement about the voluntary nature of participation and the participant’s right to refuse to participate without consequence.

4) Possible benefits. This shared the benefits of participation to the participant and to the larger community.

5) Confidentiality. This outlined the steps the researcher took to ensure all data was maintained in a confidential manner, as well as the realities of the limitations to maintaining confidentiality and anonymity.

6) Dissemination. This outlined the manner in which the researcher would share the findings and obtain releases for sharing participant-specific comments in future publications.

7) Contact information and copies. This shared the researcher’s contact information and the local IRB contact information and assurances related to the form being in the language that the participant understood”

(Adapted from Seidman, 2013, p. 64-65).

Through qualitative research, there is an expectation that the researcher and participant interact in a collaborative manner, sharing information for the benefit of the participant and the researcher, as adding to each of their individual and collective transformation (Maxwell, 2013). However, to be assured of a humane and ethical process, the researcher must intentionally “recogniz[e], acknowledge[e], and affirm the dignity of the participants” (Seidman, 2013, p. 143). By sharing about the risks, rights, benefits and respecting the confidentiality of the participants’ shared experiences, the researcher ensured a dignified process was carried out.
Methodology Summary

A narrative inquiry was used to conduct this study. This study set out to explore how the African American female executive in the nonprofit industry made sense of her leadership experiences. With there being a gap in the literature related to African American female executives within the nonprofit industry, the study relied on snowball sampling in order to achieve the desired sample size of nine (9) participants. This study engaged in a modified version of Seidman’s three-interview series for collecting data to discover the lived experiences of the participants. Thematic data analysis began after each interview had concluded and proceeded throughout the length of the study. Ultimately, by incorporating the critical qualitative measures of trustworthiness, the researcher was able to conduct a credible, thoughtful and shareable experience for its participants and future readers of the study.
Chapter 4: Findings

Introduction

The purpose of this narrative inquiry qualitative study was to explore how African American female executives in the nonprofit industry made sense of their leadership experiences. This study endeavored to gain insight into each participant’s unique voice as they shared their leadership journeys as African American female nonprofit executives. The question that guided this study was: How do African American female executives make sense of their leadership experiences in the nonprofit industry in the United States?

Through the data analysis process, facilitated through the use of ATLAS.ti software, four themes materialized, Identity: Who they are, Community Support, The Context: Industry Complexities and Obstacles to Leadership, with corresponding sub-themes. This chapter is structured in the following manner: participant demographics, participant biographies, themes and sub-themes in accordance with the research findings.

Participant Demographics

Nine women were interviewed for this study who are or were executive directors of a nonprofit organization based in the United States (see Table 4.1). Eight of the nine executive directors are still currently working in the nonprofit industry and one participant is now retired. The participants were connected to health, youth, community service, arts management, education, and social justice nonprofit organizations. The women ranged in age from early 40s to early 70s. As shown in the Participant Interest Email (See Appendix A) and based on their answers in Table 4.1, when asked to define their Race/Ethnicity, five of the women chose to identify themselves as African American, three of the women chose to identify themselves as Black and one of the
women embraced all of her racial and ethnic categories. The next section will provide a more detailed biography of each participant.

Table 4.1

*Participant Demographics*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant Pseudonym</th>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Industry</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alex</td>
<td>Retired</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>Midwest</td>
<td>Philanthropy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cherish</td>
<td>Current</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>South</td>
<td>Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ED</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Danielle</td>
<td>Current</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>Human/American Slave Descendant/Irish/English/Haitian</td>
<td>South</td>
<td>Health</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ED</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DeDe</td>
<td>Current</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>West</td>
<td>Health</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ED</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kenya</td>
<td>Current</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>South</td>
<td>Community Services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ED</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Renee</td>
<td>Current</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Midwest</td>
<td>Human Services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ED</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sandra</td>
<td>Current</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>African American &amp; Italian</td>
<td>South</td>
<td>Arts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ED</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shannon</td>
<td>Current</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>South</td>
<td>Youth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ED</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wanda</td>
<td>Current</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>South</td>
<td>Social Justice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ED</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Participant Biographies**

**Alex.** Alex is a retired Executive Director (ED) from a philanthropic nonprofit organization in the Midwest. Alex’s parents grew up in the South, but she was raised by a single mom and ultimately became politically active in her university days. Alex is a renowned Civil Rights Attorney and spent her career working on issues related to African American and women’s rights. Alex has a background in for-profit and nonprofit organizations and believed that her skill-set across these industries was an asset to her role as ED. She has two children and has won awards for her service to the community. She is three years into her retirement and consistently reiterated how complex the nonprofit industry was, how lucky she was to work alongside powerful African American female community leaders and that it was critical to always have the courage to tell the truth.

**Cherish.** Cherish is currently the Executive Director (ED) of an educational nonprofit organization in the South. Cherish has served her community for more than 20 years and has held a handful of Executive Director roles within the nonprofit industry. Cherish holds an MBA and has a passion for work around race, gender and equity and uses her position to publish articles on such topics and to advocate on behalf of underserved communities. Cherish is married, has a daughter and has received awards for her leadership on diversity issues. She shared that although she has endured race and gender bias injustices, from her name to her natural hair, she believes her sacrifices will make it easier for her daughter and other women of color who come after her.

**Danielle.** Danielle is currently the Executive Director (ED) of a health-focused nonprofit organization in the South. Danielle embraces her American Slave
Descendant/Irish/English/Haitian ancestry and as a multi-lingual (English, Spanish and Portuguese) professional, has a background in for-profit and nonprofit organizations. She has over 20 years of strategic communications, operational management and fundraising experience and holds an MBA. Danielle has been connected to nonprofit organizations where she had to rally volunteers around her organizations’ missions. She is passionate about her work in the community, but knows that being a nonprofit is only a tax status, and as a result still must make money. Danielle has learned to engage with her stakeholders in a way where she is intentionally conscious of the lenses she wears and thus knows how she is viewed in her diverse spaces. Danielle is married and has three children and continues to be a mentor to her staff to ensure they are prepared for their next roles.

**DeDe.** DeDe is currently the Executive Director (ED) of an African American health-focused nonprofit organization in the West. DeDe brings a solid professional background in business to her role as ED, as she holds two degrees including an MBA from two Ivy League institutions. DeDe has an extensive background in strategy, development, philanthropy, fund raising and program development. She is intimately connected to her work and bears the burden of knowing that she works for her entire African American community, to ensure they have the health resources they deserve. DeDe serves on a variety of boards and steering committees dedicated to health equity and is mother to two teenage sons. While DeDe knows her work and impact will extend beyond her, she has committed to ensuring she has better self-care as she continues her work in the years ahead.
Kenya. Kenya is currently the Executive Director (ED) of a community service-focused nonprofit organization in the South. Kenya has a solid background in national and international program development with an emphasis on capacity building, cross-cultural communication, and strategic alliances. She holds a Bachelor’s of Arts degree and has held several nonprofit board positions. Kenya has a passion for volunteering and making nonprofit organizations function better and shared that she has often used how she looks, in terms of her skin tone, to help others address their biases related to how they perceive African Americans. Kenya has held founder and other ED positions in the past and states that anything done with African American women is/has been helpful in creating meaningful relationships and experiences for her.

Renee. Renee is currently the Executive Director (ED) of a human service-focused nonprofit organization in the Midwest. Renee grew up as a ward of the state and has been passionate about ensuring those individuals who can’t speak for themselves (many of whom are living with different disabilities) have a voice. She has held prior ED roles and maintains a prominent and critical role in her region on all matters related to policies and legislation affecting the communities she serves. Renee holds a Master’s degree with a focus on Nonprofit Administration with concentrations in Business and Human Services. She is a single, working mother to her daughter. Renee knows that this conversation about gender and racial equity must be elevated, as she continues to see extremely-talented African American women in this industry being exploited and under and over-utilized.
**Sandra.** Sandra is currently the Executive Director (ED) of an Arts nonprofit organization in the South. Sandra grew up as the daughter of inter-racial (African American and Italian) parents, whose mother came from Ellis Island Immigrants and whose father came from a Share-Cropping family in the South. She grew up believing that she could be and do anything and knew that the world had a place for her. Sandra has held prior ED positions, is an Adjunct Faculty member and holds an MBA. She believes in leading from a genuine and authentic place and that leadership requires one to be naked, afraid and empathetic. Sandra is married and has two daughters and a grandson. Sandra has reached a point in her career where she is happy paying it forward and ensuring the leadership pipeline is filled with people who look like her.

**Shannon.** Shannon is currently the Executive Director (ED) of a youth-focused nonprofit organization in the South. Shannon has a passion for serving underserved youth and investing in economic and educational opportunities for low-income families and youth. She grew up in a small town in the South, that lived out philanthropy in their day-to-day caring for their neighbors, in particular the seniors within their community. Shannon holds a Master’s degree and has worked in the for-profit (Journalism) and nonprofit industries, but always knew she belonged in the nonprofit industry. She is passionate about disrupting poverty, experiences her role as alternating cycles of joy and stress, yet embraces her work every-day as she sees it as her calling.

**Wanda.** Wanda is currently the Executive Director (ED) of a social justice nonprofit organization in the South. Wanda is the daughter of an English Immigrant and has dedicated her life to issues around race, class, gender equity, and building power for people of color. She comes to the nonprofit world with over 30 years of experience and a firm grasp on labor, collective bargaining and politics, holding trail-blazing roles as the first woman in some of her labor roles. Wanda shared her clear perspective that White
men run the nonprofit industry and White women work to ensure African American women don’t disrupt the system, undergirding the nonprofit industry. She shared that working in the nonprofit industry was much harder than the work she did in the labor movement, which was White male dominated.

**Themes and Sub-themes**

Based on the stories shared by the participants during this study, four themes and 14 sub-themes emerged. The first theme, *Identity: Who They Are*, had three sub-themes. This first theme showed up throughout Interview 1 and Interview 2 and it is interwoven across all of the other themes. The second theme, *Community Support*, had three sub-themes. The third theme, *The Context: Industry Complexities*, had four sub-themes. The fourth theme, *Obstacles to Leadership*, had four sub-themes. Themes and corresponding sub-themes are listed in Table 4.2.

Table 4.2

*Themes and Sub-themes*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Sub-theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Identity: Who They Are</td>
<td>Professional Worth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Family Dynamics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Self-Image</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community Support</td>
<td>Sister Circle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Staff Connections</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mentoring</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Context: Industry Complexities</td>
<td>Still a Business</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Board Dynamics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Role in the Community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Systemic Issues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Obstacles to Leadership</td>
<td>Prejudiced Standards</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>White Privilege</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Implicit Bias/Racism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Historical Realities</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Through the process of thematic data analysis, as facilitated through ATLAS.ti software, the researcher originally identified approximately 2,300 open and in vivo codes from the 18 transcripts, which covered Interview 1 and Interview 2 for each of the nine participants. Once these initial in vivo and open codes were identified, the researcher then re-read the transcripts to identify sections of data, per interview transcript, which connected directly to this study’s research question. For example, when asked about their onboarding experience, there was an indication that no formal onboarding was offered to the women. See Table 4.3 for examples of this initial coding process.

Table 4.3

*Example of Initial In Vivo & Open Coding*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview Question</th>
<th>Section of Data</th>
<th>Possible Theme/Code</th>
<th>Participant/Interview</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Did you have an onboarding experience?</td>
<td>Orientation wasn’t a formal one</td>
<td>Lack of Support</td>
<td>Alex, Interview 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What perceptions did you hold about female executive leadership roles within nonprofit organizations?</td>
<td>The field was and had been for some time dominated by executive directors, White male CEOs</td>
<td>White Male CEOs</td>
<td>Suzan, Interview 2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As ATLAS.ti captured each of the in vivo and open codes, the software was used to group the codes by common themes. For example, the open code of “Sister Circle” connected to a variety of in vivo codes related to this unique relationship. See Table 4.4 for examples of this code relationship.
Table 4.4

*Example of Open & In Vivo Codes of Sister Circle*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview Question</th>
<th>Section of Data</th>
<th>Participant/Interview</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What experiences and relationships have you found most helpful in becoming a nonprofit executive?</td>
<td>So my my my girlfriend circle changed.</td>
<td>DeDe, Interview 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>We formed what we call the you know the sister circle and try to be there to support one another.</td>
<td>Shannon, Interview 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>My fellow African American women, professional peers are a great support for me.</td>
<td>Renee, Interview 1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The researcher then again re-read each transcript and created descriptive coding sheets to organize the codes from each transcript. These sheets were used to further break down the segments of data into key codes and themes from each interview that the participants seemed to emphasize consistently. See Table 4.5 for examples of these separate and distinct descriptive codes.
The descriptive coding process allowed for the recognition of distinct groups of codes and themes to be brought to life. This process allowed the researcher to detect specific relationships within the data (Saldana, 2016). After the researcher returned to the transcript after several readings of the subtexts of the interview transcripts, she continued to code and categorize the codes for data analysis (Saldana, 2016), narrowing the codes to the top 12 thematic categories. Ultimately from the descriptive coding process, the researcher was able to consolidate these 12 thematic categories down to four principal themes and 14 sub-themes, which contributed to the researcher’s findings, conclusions and were related to the research question. Through thematic narrative analysis, the researcher journeyed through the experiences of the participants as they connected their
stories and relationships to their unique leadership experiences. The participants and researcher engaged in a continuous process whereby they sought to understand connections, as they acquired, reflected upon and acted, based upon the contexts within which they found themselves. This retrospective, social and action-oriented exploration was accomplished through the process of sensemaking. The women in this study lived into their unique identities, embraced their social communities, attempted to reconcile their past with their present and sought to take action to overcome hindrances to their executive leadership experiences, through the process of sensemaking. As sensemaking was ongoing for the women as it connected past, present and future identities and realities (Benhabib, 1999) through the shared themes and associated quotes, the women came to make sense of these leadership experiences within their unique nonprofit organizational contexts. This study’s research findings, conclusions and recommendations will be shared in Chapter 5.

The themes and sub-themes identified in Table 4.2 will be described in more detail in the following sections along with the supporting quotes from the study’s participants.

**Theme 1: Identity: Who They Are**

Bringing to life who these women are involved them sharing about their professional worth, family dynamics and how they saw themselves. The in vivo and open codes uncovered for this theme and its corresponding sub-themes, offered insight into how these women defined themselves and embraced intersecting realities of race, gender, and for some class, which were experiences in direct alignment with the theoretical
underpinnings of Black Feminist Thought/Theory (BFT). This theme also offered connections to Leader Identity Theory, as it showed the women owning who they were, what they valued, their strengths and what kept them grounded. The sub-themes for this theme are explained in more detail below. Figure 4.1 provides a visual representation of this theme. Due to the interconnected nature of the diverse identities that constitute who the women are, this first theme is represented by overlapping circles. While not portrayed in each of the individual theme figures, this first theme showed up across the other themes as well, as you cannot separate the identity of the women from how they made sense of their community relationships, how they acted within their complex industry settings and how they pulled from their own values-systems to overcome the obstacles they faced related to their executive leadership experiences.

Figure 4.1

*Visual Representation of Identity: Who They Are Theme*
Theme 1: Identity: Who They Are. Sub-Theme 1: Professional Worth.

Professional Worth was expressed through the women embracing who their mother identified them to be (such as being a leader, professional, excellent, determined and using their voice), in their frustrations with not understanding why their competence, multiple degrees and business track records were not good enough, in the personal self-worth that came with attaining their degree and in the value they placed on not going the typical business route in achieving their professional growth and development and instead making their own way.

Alex shared how her mother’s assessment of her strengths encouraged her and gave her the confidence to pursue becoming a lawyer, as she stated, “I can't say I intended to do anything other than my mother said, I talk a lot and maybe I should go to become a lawyer. And she was right. Maybe somebody would pay me” (Interview 1).

However, the researcher found that Cherish expressed her frustration with why she couldn’t get a job, even with multiple degrees and a solid track record:

I couldn't get a job. I couldn't get an interview. I couldn't understand why. I'd gone back to school had a solid track record. I had a B.A., I had an MBA. I'd spoken to people. I've done everything you needed to do and manage millions of dollars X, Y and Z. (Interview 2)

DeDe also expressed her impatience with having her competence doubted even with multiple Ivy League degrees and being a seasoned professional, when she stated, “but you know the fact that I, given my experience, you know I've got two Ivy League degrees, I was not born yesterday. That folks will still come at me acting like I don't know what I'm doing” (Interview 2).
Yet, the researcher found that Sandra shared insight into the validation and self-worth she felt upon earning her degree:

And I got my bachelor's degree and I got my master's degree. But the best thing of all. Is that the day that I got my bachelor's degree and I was sitting at and they called my name and I got my degree and I sat back in my seat. Impostor left. (Interview 1)

Finally, Wanda expressed the significance of knowing her lived practitioner learning formed the foundation of her professional experience when she acknowledged, “I didn't go to any business training. I didn't go to a management class, I'm very much practitioner developed” (Interview 1).

The women in this study were able to freely embrace the relevance of how they made sense of their Professional Worth through the meanings given to each of their lived stories related to this theme. Sensemaking is usually comprehended as the intellectual act of obtaining information, framing it, and utilizing it to decide upon actions and behaviors in order to facilitate meaning for individuals (Evans, 2007). It was clear these women took the “artifacts” (i.e. words, actions, behaviors) of sensemaking to help them “realize their reality by reading into their situation, patterns of significant meaning” (Morgan, Frost, & Pondy (1983), as cited in Weick, 1993, p. 635). Whether the meaning was embracing the value imposed upon them by their mother, wrestling with the frustrations of being overqualified, yet still discounted, owning their self-worth or taking their Professional Worth into their own hands, ultimately, this process of sensemaking afforded the women the opportunity to be engaged in “identity construction” (Weick, 1995, p. 18).
**Theme 1: Identity: Who They Are. Sub-Theme 2: Family Dynamics.**

Family Dynamics was expressed through how the women made sense of the impact of their strong maternal and paternal relationships, developed their identities as a result of the political activism of their families and owned the immigration and historical connections of their bi-cultural statuses within society, thus offering a window into how these women showed up and lived into their family dynamics. Specifically, through the process of sensemaking, which involves a continuous and ongoing process of learning, this theme allowed the women to connect their past to their present as they reflected upon their familial empowerment and learnings, embraced their personal stories of what made them the women they are and facilitated them acting accordingly within their unique contexts. This sub-theme connected directly to the theoretical underpinnings of Black Feminist Thought/Theory (BFT) and Intersectionality as the women’s experiences brought together the interwoven nature of race, gender and for some class in their lives (Carastathis, 2014).

Alex expressed the empowerment she felt to succeed by seeing her single, high school educated, mother succeed when she stated, “I was raised by a single mom with a 10th grade education. And so I saw and was very much empowered by seeing her take steps to succeed. And that empowered me to succeed” (Interview 1).

Similarly focused on her mother as a role model, Wanda cued into the pride she felt in being raised by a politically active mother, which in turn encouraged her to be a leader in unions, offering her the ability to truly find herself:

My mom was an activist leader and so she was active and so and I come from a very sort of political family [my] first bit of leadership in a union. You get elected
to represent other people. And you quickly you sort of establish realize your power, your ability, you sort of begin to see yourself. (Interview 1)

However, while Alex and Wanda focused on their mothers as role models, DeDe pointed out the significance and impact of being raised and invested in by a strong father, which emboldened her to stand up to anybody who came against her:

I was raised by a very strong, I had a very strong paternal parent who kind of taught me how to believe in myself and stand my ground. And so I'm also not a pushover regardless of who it is. (Interview 2)

And as DeDe was empowered to stand up for her rights, Danielle also shared how class and her lack of privilege/status within society required her to stay focused:

Because my family wasn't wealthy and you know I wasn’t somebody’s daughter So they would ask me, oh, how did you get here? So I've always had you to again, going back to our first conversation of the lenses. Flipping down those lenses and really seeing seeing my goal and keeping my goal ahead of me. (Interview 2)

Continuing with a focus on empowerment, Sandra shared her pride in being a biracial daughter of parents with a connection to this country’s immigration and sharecropping history:

I am the daughter of a first generation Italian woman, and an African American man. My mother's parents came over first. The first wave of Ellis Island immigrants. My mother is the first of her clan born in the United States. From very poor working class parents who came across on a boat from Italy in the like nineteen twenty one and twenty two and my father's parents were sharecroppers from Charlotte, North Carolina, who migrated to Buffalo, New York during the Great Migration. (Interview 1)

Similarly, Wanda embraced her immigrant status and its impact on her own and her children’s realities when she affirmed, “we're immigrants. So you know, my kids are first generation Americans. I immigrated here from England and my mom was West Indian” (Interview 1).
From the strength and empowerment of their maternal and paternal foundations in equipping the women for success, to the pride of their cultural and historical heritage and status within society, the women were able to codify the truths embedded in their African Americanness of being self-assured, determined and willing to survive regardless of the obstacles (Paris, 1998). This connection to their culture allowed the women to embrace their “interrelated roles that change[d] through time while the family [was] [focused on] trying to maximize the quality of life” (Littlejohn-Blake & Darling, 1993, p.466). Such a strong familial foundation empowered the women to more proudly own and live into their uniqueness.

**Theme 1: Identity: Who They Are. Sub-Theme 3: Self-Image.**

Self-Image was expressed through how the women made sense of their strengths, claimed their power of being a woman, embraced multiple identities, and owned their personal values, which all had a direct connection to the theoretical frameworks of Black Feminist Thought/Theory (BFT) and Racial Identity Theory. Specifically, Black Feminist Thought/Theory (BFT) showed up in how the women were empowered to use their strength, “energy and skills to resist and transform daily discrimination,” (Taylor, 1998, p. 235) and through Racial Identity Theory, the women were able to own their “attitudes and beliefs regarding the[ir] African American community” (Shelton & Sellers, 2000, p. 29).

Cherish and Danielle owned their power in being known and executive leaders as Cherish initially shared, “having been an established leader, it's easier to get people to do things” (Interview 1) and Danielle continued as she stated, “I was more executive presence than what they were used to and they felt threatened” (Interview 1).
While, Wanda owned her power as a leader and strategist versus being a follower when she asserted, “I love leading. Right. I'm not a follower” (Interview 1) and continued with, “I'm a strategist you know. I love to pick a fight. That's where I am at my best” (Interview 1).

Further, Kenya embraced her strength of being a tenacious leader and strong communicator when she affirmed, “I think my own tenacity. I'm pretty tenacious and I think I also communicate very well with stakeholders” (Interview 1).

Alex, Cherish, Danielle, Sandra and Wanda shifted the conversation from leadership values to personal values and shared how their foundation in ethics, morals and a spiritual core guided them in their lived experiences. For example, Alex stated, “be loyal to your own belief” (Interview 1). While Cherish shared, “I think it has really helped me to learn my own self-worth and what I will and won't put up with” (Interview 2). Still, Danielle acknowledged, “you know, understanding what's right what's wrong” (Interview 1). Further still, Sandra embraced that she “is not a super religious person at all. I would say that I'm a highly spiritual person” (Interview 1). Finally, Wanda asserted that she “learned very highly to rely on instinct and learned that when you don't rely on instinct, you get in trouble hahaha or your inner voice or whatever spiritual whatever is talking to you” (Interview 1).

Wanda expressed her intentionality behind self-defining her identity in genuine and authentic ways before the world defined her when she shared, “define who you are and stay right in your authentic space” (Interview 1) and specifically, “define your success way before somebody else will” (Interview 1).
In speaking about identity, Cherish confidently owned her feminist power and identity in using her voice to be a bold and strong woman as she declared, “one of my strengths is through the power of my voice and how I use it and that women don't use it” (Interview 2), as she acknowledged “and the older I've gotten and honed into the, the strengths of my femininity, my womanism” (Interview 2).

Further, Danielle and Shannon shared the power of specifically being strong and bold African American women when Danielle began with, “it has allowed me to grow into being unapologetically Black” (Interview 2), as “I am not an affirmative action selection” (Interview 2). Shannon continued this narrative as she asserted, “my race is always with me” (Interview 2).

Finally, Danielle, DeDe, Renee, Sandra, Shannon and Wanda highlighted the realities of embracing their multiple identities. Specifically, Danielle shared, “you have to kind of wear several lenses, so if you could imagine glasses that have four lenses, you have to see the world for what it is” (Interview 1). DeDe further shared:

So it really is a constant role. But I also the last couple of years have been trying to be more deliberate because I'm also Mom and we don't really believe there's a balance. It's more of is there an equilibrium you can kind of strike. Between, personal, professional, family cetera. (Interview 1)

Renee extended the conversation when she offered that she was a:

Compassionate and fair person, but I also don't take any crap. I have developed a reputation in my my sector for being a bitch. And it's not that I wear the bitch label with pride or anything. It just it is what it is it's simply a consequence of having the identities that I have and being in the role that I'm in. (Interview 2)

Further, Sandra shared there was a “lack of understanding about what we need to do as mothers, as daughters, as wives, sisters” (Interview 1). While, Shannon asserted
that “I can't I cannot separate the fact that I'm African American from the fact that I'm leading this organization” (Interview 2). Finally, Wanda embraced her whole self as she stated:

I check a lot of boxes, right? I think I I my role as a woman, I'm very clear that I lead as a woman. And so I come at most all of my experience and my lens of the way I do my work comes from a Black female space that I don't dilute. (Interview 2).

With its core focused on “empower[ing] themselves by creating self-definitions and self-valuations that enable them to establish positive, multiple images and to repel negative, controlling representations of Black womanhood,” (Taylor, 1998, pp. 234-235), this study’s theoretical framework of Black Feminist Thought/Theory (BFT) was evident in this sub-theme and how the women embraced the strengths of their identities, values and personalities. Such power in their self-proclaimed worth and values helped to offer the women a solid foundation for leading within their unique nonprofit contexts.

It was clear that this theme focused on the identity of these women, brought together through the intersections of their multiple roles, the importance of their family upbringing, which required them to be flexible and adaptable (Boyd-Franklin, 2013), and their professional worth connected to their accomplishments. These elements offered the women a “sense of power and purpose greater than self” (Littlejohn-Blake & Darling, 1993, p.461) and the strength of owning their values which often centered on independence, a spiritual core and individual values and beliefs about who they were created to be (Spencer, 1990; Thomas, 2000). How the women ultimately lived into their identities often stemmed from the positive and empowering messages which were instilled in them from their maternal and paternal relationships, as well as the role modeling of strong African American women within their communities.
Theme 2: Community Support.

From peer networks to girlfriends to Executive Director colleagues, the women shared a common theme around the importance of maintaining close-knit support systems of other women, staff connections and a duty to mentor others and the gift of being mentored, specifically by other African American women and for some of the women, by some White men. The social and group nature of these relationships offered connections to the process of sensemaking and the study’s theoretical underpinnings of Black Feminist Thought/Theory (BFT), as it related to being empowered to persevere and “actualize a humanist vision of community” (Taylor, 1998, p.235). Leader Identity Theory, as it related to the interconnected and social nature of their community interactions and Racial Identity Theory, as it related to the importance of race for an individual (Sellers, et al.,1998), as well as their historical and cultural realities within society, were also present. Further, these theories showed up in the women’s focus on community support and social change and negotiating their multiple roles in society. The sub-themes for this theme are explained in more detail below. Figure 4.2 provides a visual representation of this theme.
Theme 2: Community Support. Sub-Theme 1: Sister Circle.

Sister Circle was expressed through the women’s intimate relationships with other African American women in their peer circles and within their communities. This focus on the social connections, empowerment, conscious-raising and support for uplifting other African American women within their community offered alignment with this study’s theoretical frameworks of Black Feminist Thought/Theory (BFT) and Racial Identity Theory.

Cherish, DeDe, Kenya, Renee and Shannon emphasized the importance of their connections with other African American women in their sister/girlfriend circles. Cherish shared, “within our sister circle, what we call it executive circle” (Interview 1). DeDe added, “so my my my girlfriend circle changed” (Interview 1). Further Kenya offered, “we have what's called a sister circle [we] all became executive directors about the same
time” (Interview 1). Renee focused specifically on the support of Black women when she shared, “the support of Black women has been absolutely pivotal” (Interview 1). Finally, Shannon added, “we formed what we call the you know the sister circle and try to be there to support one another” (Interview 1).

While Cherish, DeDe, Kenya, Renee and Shannon focused inwardly, Sandra shared the powerful dynamic of her personal external impact, as the “sister” to whom other sisters admired, when she stated, “it was like looking at all these workers-sisters and they were all looking at me” (Interview 1).

Similarly, Shannon focused on her intentionality of supporting other Black women leaders when she contributed, “my personal philosophy is to always, always support other Black women in their in their ascension to leadership” (Interview 2).

The connection to other African American women as colleagues, friends and support was clear among the women. Further, as a way to build strength and connection, this example of African American sisterhood provided the women with an opportunity for “bonding together for self-improvement, spiritual growth, and relationship building [offering] psychological strength in a hostile environment” (Harris, 1998, p. 232). In this quote, Harris centers on the sisterhood bond that supports empowerment, growth and strength, which were attributes the women needed as they lived into their African American Executive leadership experiences. This sisterhood bond is often experienced in African American female sororities has been known to create a deep connection that feels like a blood-sister relationship although the women are not blood relatives. Specifically, as shared by Gerund (2016), “sisterhood is often compared to ‘real’, i.e. biological and/or
biographical, siblings” (p. 88). Gerund (2016) further shares that, “a woman is a sister not just because she is in the same sorority; she is a sister because she is an important part of their lives and their ‘families’” (p.86).

**Theme 2: Community Support. Sub-Theme 2: Staff Connections.**

Staff Connections was expressed through the women’s staff relationships within their organizations. The social nature of sensemaking, has been shown to involve “understand[ing] connections among people, places and events” (Klein et al., 2006, p. 71). This process thus gives individuals an opportunity to collectively find agreement about the meaning and understanding of experiences and a focus on building others up through the theoretical underpinnings of Black Feminist Thought/Theory (BFT). Sensemaking offered a solid foundation for how the women lived into this sub-theme.

Cherish expressed her responsibility to do what was right for her staff when she offered, “so I have to make the right decision for the staff” (Interview 1).

As Cherish focused on doing what was moral for her staff, Shannon focused on her duty to ensure her staff took care of themselves and that she as their leader fostered a healthy working environment to retain them. She reiterated that [effective leaders] “retain good staff members and what do you do to help them with self-care and and providing a good work environment to keep to keep your your staff” (Interview 1).

Similarly focused on the commitment to her staff’s well-being, Renee showed her long-standing loyalty and dedication to keeping her staff working together with her when she offered, “I've worked with my team for a long, long time” (Interview 2).
The researcher found that Cherish made a point to highlight the importance of having a staff who supported her and upon whom she could depend to accomplish their work when she shared, “with the support of my staff bring it into the work. Right. So that is tremendous. Right. And leveraging the relationships, I have now, helped shape how we do the work”. (Interview 1)

Relatedly to Cherish’s focus on having the support of her staff, DeDe and Kenya focused on the significance of trusting their staff. Specifically, DeDe offered, “and having folks I can trust with regard to fundraising and running operations” (Interview 1). Similarly, Kenya reiterated, “I'm very lucky because I have a team of people that I that I love, that I trust, that I would trust with my life” (Interview 1).

Finally, Sandra made an effort to highlight the importance of leading from a genuine, authentic and transparent place with her staff when she affirmed, “my staff know a lot about me, as much as you know now” (Interview 1).

As these women were committed and invested in their staff and relied upon their staff for support and trust, it was clear that this sub-theme of Community Support provided what Harris (1998) shared as "the social identity of a kinship like connection between persons and among persons in society, the essential elements reflect a sense of collective social identity, not related by blood or marriage [yet still] a reciprocal, unconditional caring relationship" (p. 292). In this quote, Harris is expressing how for these women, although their staff were not often related to them by blood nor considered “family,” it was clear these African American female executives intentionally focused on and invested in nurturing and caring for the well-being of their staff, as a core element of their daily leadership experiences.
Theme 2: Community Support. Sub-Theme 3: Mentoring.

Mentoring was expressed through the women’s duty to pay it forward and mentor others as well as the gift of mentorship the women received from within their communities. The community-focused and social nature of this sub-theme offered insight into the process of sensemaking and Black Feminist Thought/Theory (BFT). Specifically, sensemaking showed up in the social construction the women engaged in as they navigated their give and take relationships embedded within their communal processes (Evans, 2007). Further, Black Feminist Thought/Theory (BFT) showed up as the women lived into the portrayal of African American females as strong women who have distinct identity among minority women and in particular, compared with White women.

Alex shared how mentorship empowered her to set an example for her daughters for going above and beyond:

So for me, it was empowering. And again, as a Black woman, raising two daughters it was my way of feeling. I was giving back above and beyond you know my my own circumstance. So I was I was very honored to to do it. (Interview 1)

Similarly, Cherish and Sandra shared their mentorship focus on making it easier for those coming behind them and creating a sustainable pipeline of mentees, inclusive of young people and fellow African American female Executives when they contributed. Cherish specifically offered:

I think the work that other African American women are doing and the sacrifices that they're making is important and makes it a little bit easier for the next one. So I'm OK taking hits sometimes because I'm hoping that when my daughter runs, whatever, it'll be a little bit easier for her. Right. I'm hoping that my staff, which I have a bunch of African American women when they decide to become executives, it'll be a little bit easier for them. Right. (Interview 2)
Further, Sandra noted, “I'm loving this work. I'm loving the mentoring because I'm loving the idea of putting people in the pipeline” (Interview 1).

In putting mentees in the pipeline, Wanda shared her mentorship focus on young, African American women specifically when she claimed, “you know, at 56 I see myself much more in a mentor role with Black, with young women” (Interview 1).

In expanding the pipeline, Sandra focused on her role in mentoring women of color and White guys when she embraced, “I'm a mentor for women of color in the arts, and I have been for about five years. So I have a whole bunch of mentees, a bunch of sisters. A couple of White guys that I've mentored” (Interview 1).

The researcher found that it was important for Kenya to share how the mentees in her program moved on to succeed as she shared, “and I had mentored one of the girls in this program who's now in college” (Interview 1).

While Cherish, Sandra, Kenya and Wanda focused on mentoring others, Alex and Renee highlighted their experience intentionally seeking out African American women to be their mentors. Alex reiterated that:

I told you about some of my mentors and people around me, that women, Black women around me were moving moving forward. And I wanted to be like them and give back in that same way. So I benefited from the exposure of Black female leadership. (Interview 2)

Further, Renee shared, “I sought out one of the other three Black women who are executive directors. And I asked her to be my mentor” (Interview 1).

However, Cherish, Sandra and Wanda discussed their experiences with White males as sponsors and/or supporters and learning from White males when Cherish began the conversation with:
I have been working with a White man as a sponsor. And so when I say a sponsor it's somebody who will sit down with me and I can pivot ideas to and ask ideas like, well, how would you do this? Because there is what I call what I said before about missing a lens of lived experience. I don't have the lived experience of the freedom of being a White man…So I wouldn't call it you could call him mentor. But when I went to him, I was like I want you to be my sponsor.  
(Interview 2)

Sandra continued the focus on White males with:

I really learned a lot from White men… That's how White men kind of fight each other in these corporate settings. They bring all these facts. They bring all these things. They put it in front of you. You can't dispute it. (Interview 1)

Wanda concluded the conversation about White male learnings with:

White males who tend to be more receptive… let's be honest about who has got power. Right. So but I do think focusing with people who have who are not who are more, who are decision makers. That's been the most that's been that's been really helpful. (Interview 1)

Ultimately, Wanda shared the impact that her mentoring structure had on her professional life:

But the most helpful has been sort of the sort of mentoring structure people have put in place for me, mentoring, coaching, mentorings and giving, making sure that I've built built skills in certain areas and then push me to take a lot of risk.  
(Interview 1)

Whether the women focused on mentoring as a way of setting an example for their daughters, making a way for others coming behind them, intentionally securing the support of a mentor or securing a White male sponsor (to whom they could “pivot ideas” and gain insight into how to engage with a world that was built on their White male lens), the opportunities afforded through mentorship relationships offered some of the women avenues to share their wisdom, guidance and expertise and offered others the unique “strategies for being successful and the importance of serving the community” (Harris, 1998, p.296). As Collins (2000) shared, the unique “histories of U.S. White men and
African-American women are linked, socially construct each other” (p. 267), and it was clear for some of the women, this White male sponsorship relationship benefited them as they experienced that “having a White man as your sponsor [could] really pay off” (Perez, 2019, p.1) Further, through these relationships, these White male sponsors were generally instrumental leaders who used their status and power to further the career of those in their charge (Anderson & Smith, 2019).

Historically, African American women have embraced their roles of nurturer, caregiver and supporter of their communities near and far. Specifically, African Americans have committed themselves to functioning within an “interdependence or communal cooperation” (Littlejohn-Blake & Darling, 1993, p. 460) and thus overall, this theme shed light into how these women connected their various communal roles within their respective nonprofit contexts.

**Theme 3: The Context: Industry Complexities.**

Nonprofit organizations are built upon a mission, cause, and purpose for the greater good. This theme shared the uniqueness of nonprofits, having complicated board systems, living into their mission, yet at times perpetuating systemic and structural organizational issues, such as lack of resources, lack of access to money. In connecting to this study’s theoretical frameworks and through the process of sensemaking, this theme brought out the political and economic systems of Black Feminist Thought/Theory (BFT), highlighted the women’s need to negotiate between their different Leader Identities and shed light on the impact of their Racial Identity within this complicated industry. The sub-themes for this theme will be explained in more detail below. Figure 4.3 provides a visual representation of this theme.
**Theme 3: The Context: Industry Complexities. Sub-Theme 1: Still a Business.**

Still a Business was expressed through the women’s often shared frustrations of leading their organizations within challenging and unique systems. The women made sense of and often brought their unique racial, leader and female identities into how they ran their organizations.

Alex felt it important to consistently highlight that no two nonprofits were the same when she shared, “all nonprofits are not the same” (Interview 1) and “it is not a one size fits all kind of designation because each nonprofit can be very different” (Interview 2).
However, while Alex shared that each nonprofit was distinct, Alex, Cherish and Danielle shared their realities that operationally, nonprofit organizations were run similar to for-profit organizations.

Alex focused on how the core structure of nonprofit and for-profit organizations were similar:

Well, you know, again, at nonprofitism, I can say that, really isn't that different from structure wise in terms of for-profit or corporate. It is more ummmm the the outcome you know that determines what you do and again the mechanism by which you do it. Money being one of those. (Interview 1)

Cherish continued this conversation as she highlighted the similarity between the fiscal cycles between the two sectors:

So my fiscal year ends June 29 or June 30th. The next one starts July 1st. You don't get like a week off you don't get to breathe. You don't get that, right. That is the biggest like thing, I think it going back to that question you asked. There is literally no break. There's not a break. Right now I raise my entire fiscal budget and half of the next years. And so the pressure you have never lets up. (Interview 2)

Similarly, Danielle chose to highlight the fact that besides their tax statuses, both sectors need to make money:

I don't care if you're nonprofit or for-profit. You still have a business to run and you still have operations and you still have personnel and you still have programs. And, you know, so nonprofit. I mean, like I said before, nonprofit is just tax status, you know, given to us by IRS, you know? (Interview 2)

Danielle continued with, “so, you know, that means, that doesn't mean we can't make money and it certainly doesn't mean we can't operate like as a business” (Interview 2).

Further, Alex and Sandra emphasized the transferability of skills between the two sectors. Specifically, Alex offered, “what’s happened in the for-profit community has
made people who were very comfortable in the for-profit community transfer over to the nonprofit community” (Interview 1). Further, Sandra shared:

Even though that was a nonprofit association of a for-profit industry, I also feel like I learned a lot about how to play the game in the corporate world. With big stakes and then how to translate that in the nonprofit world. (Interview 1)

DeDe took the commonality between sectors even further when she described the challenge of race and gender is seen the same, in both sectors when she claimed, “It’s equally a battle being a female a Black female who's a CEO/ED in the nonprofit sector as it is in the private sector” (Interview 1).

Adding to the challenges of leading within nonprofits, Alex and Renee emphasized that the nature of the nonprofit will determine the women’s experience leading the organization when Alex tated, “so it depends upon the nature of the nonprofit, the vision and the mission of the nonprofit as to just how what determines what you do” (Interview 1). Similarly, Renee explained:

I think it depends on the particular nonprofit industry. Those of us in human services, it's a lot of stories of exhaustion and being underpaid and and the financial woes of of constantly chasing after state funding or federal funding or Medicaid funding, that kind of thing. And then, you know, the stories that that my colleagues who are more in the arts, those stories are a lot different and there's a lot of challenges and struggles being an executive in the arts, certainly and funding can be a lot more sporadic than what we see in human services, certainly. But at the same time, there's a the pressure points are different in the arts than they are in human services. And then our our friends and in the the more environmental section of the nonprofit sector have their own challenges and their own reprieves. So it's it's very interesting. You know, nonprofit, the nonprofit sector, there's such a diversity here. We're certainly not a monolith by any stretch of the imagination. (Interview 1)

As these women shared, each nonprofit is unique and distinct. Yet, whether it is a for-profit or nonprofit organization, the processes, systems and operations of nonprofits were generally business as usual. Specifically, this similarity in business operations was
articulated by Leonard (2019) as, “in the simplest of terms, a nonprofit is a legal corporation that is granted tax-exempt status by the Internal Revenue Service (IRS), this means that every nonprofit starts the same way as a for-profit does, just because an organization is a nonprofit tax-exempt entity doesn’t mean it cannot be profitable.” (Leonard, 2019, p.1)

**Theme 3: The Context: Industry Complexities. Sub-Theme 2: Board Dynamics.**

Board Dynamics was expressed through the women shedding light into board responsibilities and disparities related to support, recognition and commitment to them as African American women leaders of their organizations. This sub-theme offered insight into how Black Feminist Thought/Theory (BFT) and Racial Identity Theory were expressed within their organizational contexts.

Alex shared the realities of the board being the core to the leader’s leadership experience:

One of the keys to a nonprofit leadership is board structure. And I don't want to lecture you because that's what I teach. But you know, leaders can only be as ummm leadership is determined by by not just job description, but board confirmation. And if there's a board that is very strict and wants a certain type of thing to happen in a certain way, that will restrict or compel a particular CEO or executive director as to how they will, you know, how they will perform. (Interview 1)

Knowing that the board often sets the tone for the leader, Cherish, Danielle, DeDe, Kenya, Renee, Shannon and Wanda shared their experiences of dealing with the realities of no formalized onboarding by their Boards as Cherish started the narrative with:

My first day at the job, no one greeted me. There were no books. There were no nothing. I walked in and the staff just kind of looked at me like, who is this young woman? They probably didn't say it that nicely, that's supposed to run this entire organization. The board didn't meet me. Nothing. It was terrible, terrible. Like
they set me up for failure, but I don't believe in failures. So there you go. Umm yeah. There was no onboarding process. I just had to figure it out, I walked into my office and there just were piles of crap everywhere. So I was like, OK, well, I'll just figure out how to run this place. So there was no onboarding, I didn't get taken to lunch. Nothing. There wasn't a book, a guide, nothing. (Cherish, Interview 1)

Danielle extended the conversation as she affirmed, “I don't remember an onboarding process persay. I don't think I've ever had a formal onboarding process, ever” (Interview 1).

DeDe offered her experience related to no onboarding when she shared:

I met the members some of the board members during the interview process, and there were. Two, two or three rounds. And then I just met them all at my first board meeting. But I don't have the kind of onboarding that I do now. (Interview 1)

Kenya added to the conversation when she shared, “so becoming the executive director in the current position again, there was no onboarding. There was. It was a trial by fire again because the organization was in such a shamble. And and I ended up training myself” (Interview 1). Kenya further asserted that:

Board members don't just offer, they may have decided, yes, you will have the role, but they don't always go through a specific process of making sure you are introduced to the community. There was no press release. You know, I see the White leaders, you know, always have a press release sent out. There was no press release. There was no call. You know, I called most of the stakeholders to say, you know, I've accepted this position. I'll be the new contact. There were no meetings set up to introduce me to stakeholders, funders, donors, major donors. (Interview 2)

Further still, Renee offered:

And I didn't actually meet with anybody ummm from the association, the National Association until after I I was after I was onboarded. And so that that's a very unique experience. And I was the only paid employee that I was really at the helm of my own onboarding. (Interview 1)
Shannon contributed that, “it wasn't a formal onboarding. It really was. It was entrepreneurial. I think that's the word I would use” (Interview 1).

Wanda continued with, “and so my onboarding experience was open the drawer. Figure it out” (Interview 1).

Finally, Kenya shared her realities of the lack of/inconsistent board support:

Most common is the lack of, especially those who are people of color, the lack of support, the hesitancy among the board, you know, will this really work? Are you really as good as? And, you know, do your credentials? (Kenya, Interview 1)

Ultimately, Kenya stated, “if it's an exec of color stories are similar to mine, and we we end up doing the commiserating thing that, gee, you know what my board doesn't do this for me? My board doesn't do that for me” (Interview 1).

With a general theme of lack of Board support and lack of onboarding, these women often had to figure things out on their own and use their own resources to orient themselves to their new executive leadership roles. This theme offered insights into the challenges with board dynamics for these women. However, this challenge has been shared across the industry, as board members of color have often felt, that “power was held by a close inner circle and/or perception that people of color could not hold certain leadership positions, ignored or being the lone minority voice that is constantly outvoted and not taken seriously; however looks good in the photo ops, treated like a token. Having decisions made by a small group of ‘insiders.’ Not being heard. Being treated with condescension or as though I am invisible.” (Walker & Davidson, 2010, p.10).

**Theme 3: The Context: Industry Complexities. Sub-Theme 3: Role in Community.**

Role in Community was expressed through the shared realities and expectations of nonprofit organizations’ duties and responsibilities within the larger community. This
sub-theme offered insight into the relationship between how the women made sense of their organizations’ roles in meeting or not meeting community expectations.

Alex focused on how the industry was set up to serve African Americans around specific issues which impacted their communities:

Well, given it was at that time, it was when it was called the Coalition of Concerned Women in the War on Crime. Founded by a group of African American men and women to handle primarily rape cases in the African-American community that had been overlooked by the department. And our role was to give women who had been raped and you know take them, not only if they went to the hospital, but also get them to go into the police department and make formal charges. So for me, given a woman, given it was serving the African American community. (Interview 1)

Alex continued the conversation with:

And and nonprofit leaders…feeling like it was back in the day when I first started a lot of burden on their shoulders to make it happen. When, again, it's complex, it's not one organization versus another, but many of them are feeling the burden of that…..you've got the Obama Foundation and others that are very important and very, you know, nationally respected but then you have other organizations, like the one that I spoke to who I really respect, RAGE, that, you know, is struggling to keep themselves going as they address the issues of community violence, unemployment, lack of jobs and all of those. (Interview 1)

Alex finally concluded her thoughts about African American community issues with:

I was honored to be exposed to and really raised around leadership in the nonprofit community, particularly African-American and female leadership that not necessarily at the defined leader, but leadership at least in the Black community that was relevant to the issues that we wanted to work on. (Interview 2)

DeDe joined the conversation as she shared the realizations that the African American community had many needs as she acknowledged they “have a community that has so many needs” (Interview 1).

Danielle continued this theme of issues which impacted the African American community, as she asserted, she is there to help other community-based organizations or
CBOs at that point. To help them understand how they can reduce the transmission of HIV” (Interview 1).

As DeDe and Danielle focused on African American community needs, Shannon emphasized how she was an active participant within her hometown community’s philanthropic efforts when she recalled, “I got to see philanthropy firsthand and how a community can rally around each other and take care of one another, even when the resources are not so great” (Interview 1).

In leading within their nonprofit communities, Cherish, DeDe and Wanda emphasized how their work was focused selflessly on what was happening within the community and building their community up. Cherish began the conversation as she offered, “based on what I see is happening in the community, I can create work and work plans based on that” (Interview 1). Further, DeDe affirmed, “it's not about me, it's about this entire community” (Interview 2). Ultimately, Wanda declared, “I want to help folks lift their community” (Interview 2).

Renee rounded out the work of the sector conversation with her focus on what the sector was intended to do as she proclaimed, “we're talking about a sector that attracts people that self identify as do-gooders and progressives” (Interview 1).

However, Alex, DeDe, Renee and Wanda shared where the nonprofit industry was not meeting expectations within the community. Alex first questioned, “what do you do about, you know, things impacting the community that have a negative impact on the community you're serving?” (Interview 2) DeDe continued with her focus having “been to remind our community that we've got to stop fighting over crumbs because there is so
much money being left on the table” (Interview 2). Renee continued with, “and the reality is, is that the support that we can provide might not necessarily line up with what they were anticipating” (Interview 1). Finally, Wanda asserted, “the nonprofit community does not, the leadership does not match those those people who they represent or on whose behalf they fight” (Interview 2).

With its primary focus on “aiding or advancement of the society at large,” (wallstreetmojo.com), these women believed in and were committed to the work for which their unique nonprofits were created. While there may have been disconnects between the nonprofits always living into their purposes of “promoting a social cause or advocating for a particular standpoint [providing] services [to] strive to solve important, potentially life-threatening problems and issues,” (Norwich University Online) the women overall believed in the impact that their nonprofit organizations could have within their respective communities.

**Theme 3: The Context: Industry Complexities. Sub-Theme 4: Systemic Issues.**

Systemic Issues was expressed through the structural, organizational and operational deficits of the nonprofit industry, which impacted the women’s leadership experiences. This sub-theme brought to life the study’s theoretical underpinnings of Black Feminist Thought/Theory (BFT), Racial Identity Theory and how the women made sense of living into their leadership experiences within such White male-dominated and lacking in infrastructure contexts.

DeDe, Renee and Wanda shared their frustrations with leading in an industry with infrastructure and accountability issues. DeDe began the dialogue with, “but they didn't see any of the local African American nonprofits having the infrastructure to do the
work” (Interview 1). Further, Wanda asserted, “but organizational infrastructure change, structural change, not even on the horizon” (Interview 2) and stated there is “very little accountability and very little structure in the nonprofit community” (Interview 1). Wanda continued with, “and then there's this shift to this distributed strategy. Right. Which is the tyranny of no structure is what I call that right. The tyranny of no structure means it's unaccountable. I can't account for who's doing what” (Interview 2). Renee ultimately asserted, “we're dealing with stakeholders who don't have a complete picture of where the buck stops and where accountability lines up and so we're we're constantly dealing with people” (Interview 1).

From infrastructure and accountability issues (often tied to the struggle to get resources, fewer resources, lack of access to resources, lack of power, lack of influence), Sandra and Wanda shared their burdens of leading within patriarchal and White-dominated systems. Sandra began the discourse with:

And when I entered almost 30 years ago, the field was and had been for some time dominated by executive directors, White male CEOs…. And so I kind of entered the field understanding that I was entering in this White male field. (Interview 2)

Wanda further elaborated with:

…I think what's hard about this environment is that people actually think that their mission is to save people, poor people, brown people, Black people, brown people. Right. And they're that's and they're doing good public service. And that's what they're doing. And isn't it great? I'm I'm going to lift those people up. It's very paternalistic, right. (Interview 2)

Ultimately, Wanda declared, “there's an assumption that it's doing the right thing, but it's not really able to fully realize what it can be because the power structure is designed by men and White leaders and White women” (Interview 2).
Finally, Renee came to terms with the root of why the industry was ultimately needed:

I speak out pretty pretty loudly about race and disability and various other intersections of marginalization and. …also be extremely outspoken about what I see as being the systemic causes that necessitate a lot of these organizations needing to exist in the first place. (Interview 2)

This sub-theme offered a window into the real structural and accountability issues often dealt with by these women within their nonprofit organizations. Also, as there is typically only one person of color (specifically only one woman of color) at the executive leadership table, leaders of color are often the sole spokespersons for the communities of focus or communities needing assistance (Wallace, 2019). Further, as experienced by these women, the nonprofit industry presented them with circumstances where there were steeper hills to climb in terms of operations, board relationships, impact within the community and institutional oppressive systems, than their White colleagues.

Consequently, as the industry celebrates the impact of those nonprofits with larger budgets, which often are led by White people, such a truth often leads people of color to assume that the industry is set-up for White people to be entitled to all of the influence and power (Wallace, 2019).

**Theme 4: Obstacles to Leadership.**

Women’s obstacles to leadership were expressed through their experiences with Implicit Bias/Racism, being held often to prejudiced standards when compared with their White female counterparts and the historical realities of being African American women within society. This theme offered insight into how the women made sense of their leadership experiences in alignment with the theoretical frameworks of Black Feminist Thought/Theory (BFT) related to the intersection of race, gender and for some class
oppression, Leader Identity Theory related to how the women had to negotiate their different identities within their contexts and Racial Identity Theory related to the women’s historical and cultural experiences within society. The sub-themes for this theme are explained in more detail below. Figure 4.4 provides a visual representation of this theme.

**Figure 4.4**

*Visual Representation of Obstacles to Leadership*

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**Theme 4: Obstacles to Leadership. Sub-Theme 1: Prejudiced Standards.**

Prejudiced Standards was expressed through the requirements imposed upon the women which were not equally required of their White female and male counterparts carrying out their leadership responsibilities. Black Feminist Thought/Theory (BFT) and Leader Identity Theory provided a solid foundation from which the women made sense of their leadership experiences within this sub-theme.
Renee, Sandra and Shannon generalized the conversation around the inequities and struggles uniquely inherent in being African American. Renee shared:

Every single Black person I know who's in a executive position prior to being in in their positions you know had to had to to you know years, decades of of just hard work, lots of education and lots of certifications cetera, et cetera, et cetera. You know, the whole the the adage that we have to work twice as hard as our colleagues in order to to get to where, you know, our colleagues are. (Interview 2)

Sandra affirmed:

And we still are trying so hard to be that, but our struggles are harder and steeper and more real and more dynamic and not in a good way than, White women, White men, even Asian women, Asian men. Our our our struggles are very different. (Interview 1)

Shannon further declared, “African Americans in leadership roles had to work even harder in in raising money and gathering supporters of of different nationalities than their White counterparts” (Interview 2).

Cherish expanded the conversation by pointing to the unequal expectations of African American women’s work, explaining, patience, and fighting, all while being ignored, and also framed these inequities within the caregiving nature often expected of African American women. Specifically, Cherish added:

I have to work harder, I have to explain things more. I have to be more patient. I have to fight more. I have to put up with more crap. I'm ignored more. I'm, there's more expectation, particularly around the caregiving piece. (Interview 2)

Danielle went further to speak to how the intersecting identities of gender and race required harder and higher expectations:

But because I feel like, one being African American and two being a female, I was held to higher and quicker results, I you got to ride that horse, you gotta ride that horse hard. And I I don't have I didn't have the luxury. (Interview 2)
Consequently, with the truths of having to do twice as much, twice as fast and twice as well, Cherish and Danielle shared their realities of not being treated equally as their White counterparts. Cherish declared, “and frankly speaking, when I look at some of the work that my peers and counterparts are doing, it's not always equal to the amount of work that I've done” (Interview 2).

Danielle provided her personal experience related to unequal treatment when she recounted:

I don't have the luxury of perhaps some of my non African American executive leaders have. I don't have the luxury of walking into any room and everybody, you know, know where you are or walk into a room. I mean, up until recently, you know, I had a golf event and I walked into the room and people treated me as if I was the wait staff. (Interview 2)

Alex went further and owned the fact that her personal journey was harder than her White female counterparts, specifically, when she shared, “I mean, was it harder than the White women that ran the YWCA? Absolutely” (Interview 1)

Shannon continued Alex’s dialogue as she suggested that her intersecting identities created a different experience than her White female counterparts, when she asserted, “it's it's different. Being a Black female executive leader in a nonprofit. It's very different than a [sic]White female leader, peer” (Interview 1).

Having witnessed that African American female executives’ journeys were harder, Danielle and Renee spoke to the realities of knowing that when they encountered African American women peers in executive leadership roles, they knew these women’s journeys and credentials had to be top-notch. Danielle shared:

I thought that those sisters worked hard to get to where they were. And they had to work twice as hard, twice as long and be twice as educated and and credentialed to get to where they they sat versus those that weren't. (Interview 2)
Renee further asserted:

And I would go further if a person is a Black woman Ummm You know the rules three to four times as hard. You have to work three to four times as hard in order to to get into these positions. (Interview 2)

With the knowledge of different work experiences and expectations, Kenya, Renee and Shannon shared their realities of being subject to different rules than their White counterparts. Kenya started the conversation with:

I've been in this position for eight years. Taking over for someone else. And it was. It was a White girl that had just done everything wrong and had…. you had different rules for the White girl than you had for me… All of a sudden, all the rules and regulations came down and I was like, OK, so you had no rules for the White girl and you got all these rules for me. (Interview 1)

Renee extended the conversation when she added:

Yeah, it's it's totally different because the the the rubric is completely different for Black women in the nonprofit sector. You know, the the the output of of our work has to far supersede our coll our White colleagues in order for us to be seen as being viable candidates for terminal positions. (Interview 2)

Shannon personally affirmed, “I have that added burden of being watched hahaha you know, I have that added burden of is she capable? Can she do this job?” (Interview 2)

Wanda ultimately summarized her perception of the experience of working African-American females when she declared, “I probably always get the, you know, Black women always get the hardest assignments and the worst assignments. Right. And that is clear to me. That is demonstrably clear to me” (Interview 1).

From often having to work harder in harder jobs, being treated differently than their White female counterparts, to being subjected to different rules of the game than their White counterparts, the women in this study were regularly impacted by prejudiced standards imposed upon them. Further as shared by Rosette & Livingston (2012), “since
Black women are members of two marginalized groups (Black and female), they might experience greater discrimination, a ‘double jeopardy’ and be evaluated more negatively than individuals that hold one marginalized identity (i.e. White women or Black men)” (Abstract, p. 1162). Consequently, research concludes that African American women in leadership roles are often more critically judged and penalized than their White female counterparts, when they make mistakes in the workplace (Cheeks, 2018).

**Theme 4: Obstacles to Leadership. Sub-Theme 2: White Privilege.**

White privilege was experienced through the professional experiences of the women. This sub-theme was expressed as the women made sense of their leadership experiences within the theoretical frameworks of Black Feminist Thought/Theory (BFT)’s focus on race and gender oppressions and Racial Identity Theory’s focus on the institutionalized nature of African American oppression and the impact on their professional Leader Identity as African American leaders.

Cherish acknowledged that any difference in her leadership experiences was attributed to White Privilege or Privilege in general as she noted, “I would assume it's different just because of known White privilege. Right. Whether even if the person is anything other than Black, there's some level of privilege that I don't get” (Interview 2).

DeDe further claimed that whether in the private sector or another sector, White Privilege was still a reality as she highlighted, “that even though we like to think it's slightly different than the private sector. You know, the the same White privilege train exists” (Interview 1).
Ultimately, Wanda took the White privilege conversation deeper to specifically connect privilege to White female privilege, as they are unable to see oppression outside of their own oppression:

And then another story. I guess the stories that the White women where they really didn't understand oppression, right? Like the White female privilege was they, they took they sort of project, their oppression and sort of see their oppression as equally as you see the oppression. Right. (Interview 1)

It was evident that some of the women experienced what they perceived as White privilege as they lived into their leadership experiences. White privilege is often exposed in the workplace when preference is given to White people. Specifically, as it relates to women, White female privilege shows up when preference is given to White women versus given to the “women whose social identities are different from the dominant workplace expectations—that is, women who are not White, straight, less than 40, and [are] childless” (Kramer, 2020, p.1). Further, as African American women are often characterized by being the “Angry Black Woman,” they are “more likely than White women to be treated unfairly in promotions and training, to be discriminated against in advancement opportunities, and to experience a far greater sense of frustration and disengagement” (Kramer, 2020, p.1).

**Theme 4: Obstacles to Leadership. Sub-Theme 3: Implicit Bias/Racism.**

Implicit Bias/Racism showed up through the various barriers imposed upon the women as they carried out their leadership experiences. This sub-theme was lived into as the women made sense of how their leadership experiences were expressed in alignment with the theoretical frameworks of Black Feminist Thought/Theory (BFT) and its focus on racial and gender oppression and Racial Identity’s focus on the demoralizing nature of their cultural existence within society.
Alex shared the gender bias she was subjected to specifically related to the assumed masculinity tied to her name:

And as a woman and many of them at that time with a name like Alex, they assumed that I was a male a White male. And then when I met with them, you know, they were somewhat surprised, particularly those advocacy groups that we were working with, because they weren't not only they weren't Black women, they weren't even Black men that involved in that particular issue. (Interview 2)

While Alex’ bias was connected to how her name was typically associated with being a masculine name. Cherish’s bias was also connected to her name, but racially; she was discriminated against because of her name sounding too ethnic:

Let's start with my name. So my name is Cherish. I couldn't get a job. I couldn't get an interview. I couldn't understand why. I'd gone back to school had a solid track record. I had a B.A.; I had an MBA. I'd spoken to people. I've done everything you needed to do and manage millions of dollars X, Y and Z, a White Guy said, Oh, it’s your name? You got to use, drop Cherish. You'll get an interview; you'll get a job just like that. It was like your name is too ethnic. People can't figure it out. That's what it is. I was like, well, ain't that a bleep, bleep bleep? But I took his advice because one of my mantras is what is, what would a White man do? And then I'm like, oh, do that. And so I took his advice and immediately started [getting] calls and got the position, within probably six months. (Interview 2)

In continuing the conversation related to overt ethnic or cultural bias, Cherish, Danielle and Sandra offered insight into their experiences living with African American hair. Cherish began the discourse with:

Hair is another one. So I’ve had seventeen thousand hairstyles. And as we know, study after study says that people have bias against natural hair…. But anyway, so I changed my hair to help, you know…So that’s definitely been an issue. (Interview 2)

Danielle offered her perspective as she shared, “then another old White guy came up to me when we were saying goodbye to our guests and he had hugged me and he was like I really like your hair, is that all you?” (Interview 1)
Sandra further extended the conversation as she offered, “some days I dreaded just being. Just having somebody ask me about my hair” (Interview 1).

While Cherish, Danielle and Sandra’s conversations about African American hair directly connected to an African American female’s lived experience in society, Kenya shared her experience of racial bias against the African American community as a whole:

At one social event, the host was saying to people, oh, if anybody wants to take any leftovers, because it was a private event and it was catered and he said we had some containers that we can give people. And everybody was saying, no, no, no, I'm not taking anything. It was a nice little soiree, but thank you, but no. And he said to me, are you sure? Are you sure? Don't all Black people take doggie bags? (Interview 2)

Obviously, these women were able to share their personal experiences with gender, ethnic and racial bias to which they were subjected, however, Alex and Cherish furthered the bias conversation as they acknowledged that African American women had to go above and beyond as leaders, ultimately as a result of both sexism and racism. Alex asserted, “again, the sexism and to some degree, racism that was there. Made me realize that we had to step, that I had to step be above and beyond some of the normal expectations of leadership” (Alex, Interview 1).

Cherish added:

And I think you probably have to do it more as an African American woman because, while, just because of simple implicit bias and cultural, and just this implicit and explicit bias, there’s always a little bit more you have to do. (Interview 2)

Renee connected to Alex and Cherish’s experiences of racism and sexism, as she called attention to these types of discriminatory systems being woven into the inner-workings of the nonprofit sector:
But at the same time, I think that there are real conversations that need to be had about some of the shadow side of the the nonprofit sector with regards to being not just a woman, but being a Black woman, being a woman of color and the the discrimination and out and outright racism that we experience in this sector. That needs to be talked about. It needs to be examined. (Interview 1)

Finally, in speaking about the realities of discrimination within the nonprofit sector, DeDe offered a name for these institutionalized bias practices connected to privilege and power and the resulting limitations to access and resources:

One of my girlfriends calls it the nonprofit industrial complex it's as racist as every other aspect… the nonprofit sector is such a big industrial complex with regard to who has privileges, who have power and who doesn't. And I think that's true. (Interview 1)

DeDe further elaborated by sharing that “institutionalized racism, there’s a difference in opportunity. There's a difference in access to resources” (Interview 2).

Further, while DeDe focused on the broader effects of racism from within the nonprofit context, Sandra shared that although a citizen of her local community, racism still kept her as an outsider as she acknowledged, “so I think that I think some of it was some of it was covert racism, even though I've lived in this community since nineteen eighty nine, they somehow think of me as an outsider “(Interview 2).

Ultimately, whether as an insider or an outsider, Sandra and Shannon pointed to the fact that with the absence of people of color or African Americans in leadership, implicit bias and racism were clearly working within the systems upon which nonprofit organizations existed. Specifically, Sandra shared:

Implicit bias that keeps that from happening or else by now…agencies [that] are practically 50, 60 years old that by now, there would be some people of color that had a least once been the director, but I haven’t seen that happen. (Interview 2)

Shannon further offered:
Again, not enough, not enough ummm African American leaders in leadership. And again, that it takes us, that it takes. I'm just trying I'm trying to be hahaha gather my thoughts around this that that unfortunately racism exists. We can't ignore that. (Interview 2)

Whether it came in the form of gender, racial, hair bias or covert racism, the women had to deal with these discriminatory belief systems which impacted how they showed up in their executive leadership roles. It has been shown that through “microaggressions, double standards, and unconscious bias[es]” (Washington & Roberts, 2019) women leaders of color and doubly/triply African American female leaders of color, are often met with harassment in various forms. Further, research suggests “they are often held to a much higher standard than their White and male peers and presumed to be less qualified despite their credentials, work product or business results” (Washington & Roberts, 2019).

**Theme 4: Obstacles to Leadership. Sub-Theme 4: Historical Realities**

Historical Realities showed up through the cultural and societal truths of oppression under which the women carried out their leadership experiences. This sub-theme offered insight into how the women made sense of their leadership experiences as expressed through the theoretical underpinnings of Black Feminist Thought/Theory (BFT) and its focus on the intersection of identities and Racial Identity Theory and its focus on institutionalized historic experiences of oppression imposed upon the African American community. Specifically, there is a focus on how African Americans within society experience their realities as “not only a consequence of their stigmatized status within this society, but also as a function of their particular historical and cultural experiences in America and Africa” (Shelton & Sellers, 2000, p. 29).
Sandra shared how slavery and a slave mentality created obstacles between African Americans, keeping them focused on taking care of themselves versus the community as a whole:

As I’ve said, quite tongue in cheek, the magnificence of slavery is that. We were kind of, if you will, branded into us that we were not to reach out for one another, that we were in this for whatever, we were in this by ourselves, and that there was no there was no way that we could reach out and bring another up. (Interview 2)

Sandra further offered, “you do understand that slavery and that slave mentality still exists in some ways, I understand that it was White men. And then I understand it was White women. And now I’m here” (Interview 2).

Shannon expanded Sandra’s slavery dialogue as she spoke to the competitive nature of slavery putting up barriers between African American women specifically, thus discouraging them from supporting and lifting each other up. Shannon began with “I think that we have this sense of scarcity as well. So it sets up a competitive” (Interview 2) and further elaborated with:

It’s not necessarily that we don’t want to see other African American women in leadership. I think there’s that fear that it could risk that if they’re if they don’t succeed, it reflects badly on them. And and so we can just go back. I mean, we can go back to slavery times, etc. (Interview 2)

Shannon ultimately concluded with the fact that:

We size each other up. Hahaha You know, we do talk about that. And I think, you know, some of that is historical being pitted against each other. Who’s gonna get the better you know, the better position in slavery. (Interview 2)

In connecting Sandra’s and Shannon’s focus on slavery’s inter-personal barriers wedged between African Americans, DeDe and Wanda shared their experiences of leading within the space of scarcity and being under-resourced, often due to the underpinnings of slavery. DeDe acknowledged that “it gets especially hard when you're
fighting for communities with fewer resources who are historically under-resourced” (Interview 1). Wanda added, “I think that our environment of the scarcity, the scarcity mentality which is a big deal” (Interview 1) and that “it's scarcity. Right. It's there's only so many jobs. And so I can't lift you up or I can't really be friends with you” (Interview 2). Ultimately, Wanda declared, “it's like that scarcity. Scarcity of resources, scarcity of us” (Interview 2).

While clearly the women shared their truths related to how slavery and a slave mentality impacted their relationships and resources, it followed that operating within this foundation of scarcity, uncovered clear issues related to equity. Cherish shared that her equity fight was related to her pay, as she declared, “I could probably point to every single job or every other month, every other minute where my race comes into play, covertly it's played a role. And how much I've been paid, my fight for equity around that” (Interview 2).

While pay equity was Cherish’s battle, Kenya highlighted the importance of equity and access related to job opportunities and knowledge:

The same opportunity that you'd give the blonde White person? Or will you be held back? That's what equity is. It's nothing. It's nothing more than access. And if they don't have access to the job and then if they do get the job, do they have access to your knowledge? (Interview 1)

Ultimately, Wanda acknowledged the impact of access, power and influence and how the implications of lacking these tools created an unequal playing field:

Access to power, influence. We don't have the same access to power and influence. We don't have that legacy. We don't have legacy organizations, legacy lifts, lists, you know, old money, new money. I think the access to wealthy interests. We just don't have the same kind of access. I think in a very unlevel playing field. (Interview 2)
Equity, Access, Slavery and Scarcity were the terms that brought out the truths behind this sub-theme for these women. It is clear that African American women have been positioned in a historical context that has placed them in disadvantaged places related to employment practices, discrimination, harassment, bias and overall government policies (Banks, 2019). Further, the “negative representations of Black womanhood have reinforced these discriminatory practices and policies” (Banks, 2019). Further still, “since the era of slavery, the dominant view of Black women has been that they should be workers, a view that contributed to their devaluation as mothers with caregiving needs at home. African American women’s unique labor market history and current occupational status reflects these beliefs and practices” (Banks, 2019).

Summary

Overall, there were several themes and sub-themes shared among the women impacting how they made sense of their unique leadership experiences as African American women in the nonprofit industry.

This study’s first theme, Identity: Who They Are, reflected the women’s professional, family and individual stories as shared through their respective interviews. The sub-themes contained within this theme were: Professional Worth, Family Dynamics and Self-Image. This theme offered insight into how the women made sense of the inner-workings of Black Feminist Thought/Theory (BFT) and its focus on being strong African American women who have unique identities, which differ from White women and Leader Identity Theory and its focus on giving meaning to their personal and role identities. Women discussed their professional worth, achievements and learning; significant aspects of how they were raised; and intimate facets of their self-image.
Community Support, this study’s second theme, highlighted the interconnected and give-and-take nature of the women’s many community relationships. This theme’s sub-themes were: Sister Circle, Staff Connections and Mentoring. This theme also supported how the women made sense of their leadership experiences within the context of the theoretical frameworks of Black Feminist Thought/Theory (BFT) and its focus on being a self-defined participant in a community of strong African American women and Leader Identity Theory and its focus on living into their identities as leaders within their communities. Women shared about the power of maintaining a close group of African American women as a support system; the importance of the reciprocity of support between them and their staff; and the responsibility to mentor others and the gift of being mentored.

This study’s third theme, The Context: Industry Complexities emphasized the unique and challenging nature of working with and leading nonprofit organizations. This theme’s sub-themes were: Still a Business, Board Dynamics, Role in Community and Systemic Issues. This theme shed light on how the women made sense of how Black Feminist Thought/Theory (BFT), and its focus on transforming political and economic systems, Leader Identity Theory and finding a common system to give meaning to their leader experiences and Racial Identity Theory and its focus on understanding the institutional nature of oppression, guided them in their leadership experiences. Women discussed the similarities between running a for-profit and running a nonprofit organization; the lack of onboarding, resource support and respect from their Board; the diverse, challenging and often resource-strapped environments of their nonprofits; and
the structural and infrastructure deficiencies impacting the spaces within which the women led.

Obstacles to Leadership, this study’s fourth theme, discussed the barriers and hindrances the women faced in living into their executive leadership roles within the nonprofit industry. The sub-themes for Obstacles to Leadership were: Prejudiced Standards, White privilege, Implicit Bias/Racism, and Historical Realities. This theme further expanded the conversations the women made sense of related to the true forces at work under Black Feminist Thought/Theory (BFT) and its intersection across race and gender for the women, Leader Identity Theory and its focus on how the women had to negotiate their various personal, professional and social identities within oppressive systems and Racial Identity Theory and its focus on being labeled and stereotyped within institutionalized and historical contexts. Women shared their experiences related to often having to do more, being treated differently, yet having higher expectations as Executive Directors, than their White counterparts; experiencing White privilege; being subject to implicit bias and racism; and coming to grips with the underlying oppression resulting from the historical truths of being African American females in society.

This study’s findings and interpretations are further explored in Chapter 5.
Chapter 5: Findings, Conclusions and Recommendations

Introduction

The purpose of this narrative inquiry qualitative study was to explore the executive leadership experiences of African American females within nonprofit organizations. This study sought to understand how African American female EDs/CEOs made sense of their leadership journeys. This chapter is structured as follows: first, interpretation of the findings, followed by conclusions and finally, recommendations for future research and practice. The guiding question of this study was: How do African American female executives make sense of their leadership experiences in the nonprofit industry in the United States?

Interpretation of the Findings

The manner in which African American female executives made sense of their executive leadership experiences, lived into their multiple identities and owned their African American femaleness, offered unique insights into who they were and how they tackled the many obstacles and challenges they faced. These experiences offered them the space to create their individual executive leadership identities within the nonprofit industry.

Sensemaking

Known as the father of sensemaking, Karl Weick, advised that this term simply means “the making of sense” (Weick, 1995, p. 4). Throughout this study, participants experienced the process of sensemaking as a way that the researcher and participants absorbed information, constructed it, and utilized it to ascertain activities and behaviors,
such that they could engage in meaning making (Evans, 2007). As further shared by Evans (2007), sensemaking is made of particular key tenets:

1) first, sensemaking is socially created, negotiated, and accepted through a shared process, which encourages individuals to make sense of their experiences through the relationship between meanings and actions between one’s self and others;

2) next, sensemaking is specific to distinct values-heavy contexts, which facilitate individuals making sense of their experiences from unique signals they receive from multiple, intersecting contexts;

3) further, sensemaking is interpreted based on the signals that are rooted in the “values, beliefs, and assumptions, of the context, as well as their own beliefs, expectations, and interpretations” (Evans, 2007, p. 161); and

4) ultimately, sensemaking is positioned within the larger context of the institution which offers a basis for socially appropriate actions and behaviors.

This study’s four emergent themes illustrated the importance of sensemaking: a) Identity: Who They Are, b) Community Support, c) The Context: Industry Complexities, and d) Obstacles to Leadership. Often, the aspects of these themes and their accompanying sub-themes related to the interaction between the individual participant, her unique workplace, and her position within society. The interplay between these contexts often determined how the women defined and responded to their experiences and it was through these various contexts and identities that the women made meaning of, defined, and acted upon (Evans, 2007) their roles as African American female executives.
The process of sensemaking offered the women in this study the opportunity to bring to life their varied identities, collectively offer insight into their leader journeys and shed light on the unique and often biased/oppressive environments within which the women lived into their executive leadership roles. Each of the four themes were central to the expression of meaning making for the women interviewed for this study and throughout their executive leadership experiences within the nonprofit industry.

**Black Feminist Thought/Theory (BFT)**

Black Feminist Thought/Theory (BFT), with its core as a critical social theory, seeks to empower African American women “within the context of social injustice sustained by intersecting oppressions” (Collins, 2000, p. 22). According to Cleage (1993, p. 55), “we have to see clearly that we are a unique group, set undeniably apart because of race and sex with a unique set of challenges.” The women in this study fully embraced the dynamic nature of BFT across all of the themes.

Beginning with familial foundations, the formal and informal family structure is central to the African American community. According to Briscoe (2000), “African Americans have distinctive family norms and values that set them apart from other family institutions in society and that the Black kin network is a functional substitute for the two-parent family” (p. 99). The focus on a maternal or paternal parent as their role model was described by some of the women. Still others focused on their cultural inheritance as immigrants as being the basis upon which they made meaning of their lived experiences. Black Feminist Thought/Theory (BFT), with a focus on the strength of their familial experiences, was brought to life through the importance of family for these women.
Beyond the family, yet within the African American community as a whole, the color of one’s skin is a main trait for establishing one’s self-image (Brown & Keith, 2003). Patricia Hill Collins (1990) offered that the overpoweringly negative representations of African American women generally require them to create “positive self-images as acts of resistance or social rebellion” (p. 95). All of the women in this study owned their unique positive self-images. Some of the women celebrated being established executives. One woman owned being a fighter. Another woman owned being a great communicator. Many of the women embraced their core values which included being highly-spiritual women. Still other women were passionate about their voice, femininity and African Americanness. The women confidently held their positive self-images of Black Feminist Thought/Theory (BFT), as they lived into their executive leadership experiences.

In embracing their positive identity, the women in this study further believed in the power of their “sister circles.” According to Bryant-Davis (2013), “sister friends can be crucial in assisting African American women, and women of ethnically diverse backgrounds, to face, address, and overcome major life transitions, including stress and traumatic stress” (p.111). Many of the women in this study described being a part of a supportive “sister circle.” Other women shared how they served as support to other “sisters” and African American women in general. As it relates to Black Feminist Thought/Theory (BFT), the women embraced its emphasis on the “relationships between the structural, symbolic and everyday aspects of domination and individual and collective struggles in various domains of [their] social life” (Alinia, 2015, p. 2334).
While the women leaned on their positive self-images and “sister circle” support systems to keep them grounded, they faced a variety of barriers in their executive leadership journeys. Some of the issues the women faced connected to the systemic struggles inherent in nonprofit organizations. As research suggests, in order for the nonprofit industry to be strong, sufficient infrastructure must be in place to support it (Gibson, 2008). Some of the women validated this reality, as they complained about the lack of infrastructure within African American nonprofit organizations and the lack of a desire to change the infrastructure issues. Some women spoke to the lack of accountability within nonprofit organizations, in general. Still others focused on the challenges of leading within a typical male-dominated industry, whereby nonprofits were often led through very paternalistic lenses. Again, Black Feminist Thought/Theory (BFT) was evident within the context of the women leading within “highly effective systems of social control designed to keep African American women in an assigned, subordinate place” (Collins, 2000, p.5).

In speaking to systems of hegemony, history depicts African American women are an oppressed group of women in United States society. As shared by Collins (2000), “the institutionalized racism that African American women encounter relies heavily on racial segregation and accompanying discriminatory practices designed to deny U.S. Blacks equitable treatment” (p. 23). Some of the women shared their experiences of these systemic inequities when they spoke about the struggles unique to being African American women. Other women described the unequal treatment related to their White counterparts. Some women called out the realities of White privilege and how it created difference in their leadership experiences. Still other women acknowledged overt and
covert racism and implicit bias’s impact as it related to their lived experiences connected to their ethnic names and African American hair. Further, Black Feminist Thought/Theory (BFT) and its articulation of how “the interrelationship of White supremacy and male superiority has characterized the Black woman’s reality as a situation of struggle,” (Collins, 2000, p. 26) came to life in how the women made meaning of their executive leadership roles.

**Leader Identity Theory**

Day and Harrison (2007) suggest that “leader identity is the sub-component of one’s identity that relates to being a leader or how one thinks of oneself as a leader” (p. 365). Further, according to Zheng and Muir (2015), “leader identity provides the organizing structure that frames and prescribes what environmental cues they attend to, how they process information, and what behavioral prototypes or standards they use” (p. 631). How the women in this study lived into their leader identity was evident in various ways. One woman embraced her professional worth by owning her mother’s assessment of her strengths. Conversely, some women wrestled with their professional worth as a result of having their leader competence and expertise constantly discredited. Still, another woman embraced her leader identity as she relied upon her practitioner experience to validate her leadership strength. As it related to Leader Identity Theory, through its interconnected nature of “meaning making, learning, and identity development,” (Brockman & Dirkx, 2006, p. 214), the women grappled with defining how their leader roles showed up within their nonprofit organizations.

The women’s leadership and leader identity was apparent in their unique nonprofit environments, specifically, as they focused on the development of their staff.
According to Zheng and Muir (2015), as a leader lives into their roles, their attention becomes the health and well-being of those within their care and community. This focus was evident with some of the women who emphasized making the right decisions for their staff. Another woman described her responsibility for the self-care of her staff. Another woman cited supporting her staff to accomplish the work. While other women shared the importance of trusting their staff. As leaders, the women fully embraced their roles of creating an environment where they collectively “interact[ed] with the[ir] community and learn[ed] to understand and participate in its history, assumptions, and cultural values and rules” (Brockman & Dirkx, 2006, p. 212).

From the time of slavery, the prevailing opinion of African American women has been that they are supposed to be workers (Banks, 2019). With this label imposed upon African American women leaders, their “leader identity development is a meaning construction process that involves a wide array of contextual variables that span different levels, and the process is nested in a complex web of phenomena such as the intrapsychic, behavioral, interpersonal, organizational, and environmental” (Zheng & Muir, 2015, p. 633). The women in this study engaged in consistent meaning making as they were exposed to prejudiced standards imposed upon them. Some of the women described not being given equal amounts of work as their White counterparts. Other women directly noted the work being harder than the work being done by White women leaders. Still other women acknowledged that as African American women, their credentials had to be stellar. Some women offered that as African American women, they were subjected to different rules than their White counterparts. As leaders of color have to engage in meaning construction around their career advancement, research shows
that they often have to plan for the added criticism and judgment (Kunreuther & Thomas-Breitfeld, 2017).

**Racial Identity Theory**

The earliest researchers focused on racial identity grounded their work in two distinct paths; W. E. B. DuBois (1903) pinned the underground approach and Gordon Allport (1954) coined the mainstream approach. W.E.B. DuBois’ path emphasized the distinctiveness of African Americans’ oppression and cultural experiences (Gaines & Reed, 1994). Allport’s path focused on racial identity embedded in the context of African American’s stigmatized position in U.S. society, without much focus on the impact of culture (Clark & Clark, 1939; R. Horowitz, 1939). The unique perspectives connected to the women’s racial identity, within the scope of the underground approach, was evident across many of this study’s themes.

What it means to be African American is unique for each individual. When conceptualizing the underground approach of Racial Identity Theory, DuBois identified that African Americans may well create a healthy, strong self-image “even with the stigma of being devalued by the larger society” (Sellers, et al., 1998, p. 21). This concept was shown as some of the women intentionally and almost defiantly owned their African Americanness. Still other women focused on the realities of embracing their dual identities of being *both* African American and a woman. The underground approach has offered strong support that the meaning that African Americans embrace related to their racial identity is a key component of their lives (Sellers, et al., 1998).
In combatting negative experiences related to their race, the women had to acknowledge the fact that the persistent oppression they faced was a key step in their positive racial identity development as African American women (e.g., Baldwin & Bell, 1985; Parham & Helms, 1981; Terrell & Terrell, 1981). Some of the negative experiences the women encountered in their leadership roles tied directly to their Board dynamics. Specifically, the majority of the women described no formalized onboarding support by their boards and while this lack of onboarding is a common practice within nonprofit organizations (Walsh, Landles-Cobb, & Karlins, 2014), one of the women acknowledged that there was a general sense of lack of Board support, especially within the circles of leaders of color. Here, Racial Identity Theory highlighted how African Americans make meaning of their experiences based on both their unique culture and their experiences as a part of an oppressed group (e.g., Akbar, 1984; Cross, 1991; Kambon, 1992; Milliones, 1980; Nobles, 1991).

Connecting to this conversation of oppression, the concept of White privilege found its way into the study for some of the women. With its focus on providing Whites with greater “access to power and resources than people of color do; in other words, purely on the basis of skin color doors are open to [Whites] that are not open to other people,” (Kendall, 2002, p. 1) one of the women offered that the difference in her leadership experiences had to do with some level of White privilege. Still another woman acknowledged that White privilege is the same in the nonprofit as well as the for-profit sectors. While one woman blatantly cited that White privilege was apparent with White women directly as they are unable to acknowledge another’s oppression, because they believe they are equally oppressed. For the women in this study, Racial Identity
Theory offered the women the ability to hold on to the power of their individual identities as African Americans (Sellers, et al, 1998).

While there is power in owning one’s African American identity, the historical realities of leading as African American women within the nonprofit industry was central to the women’s experiences. According to the underground approach, “racial prejudice is a by-product of America's history of slavery and exploitation” (Sellers, et al. 1998, p. 20). Some of the women acknowledged that slavery created barriers preventing African Americans from taking care of each other. Another woman spoke to the realities of the limited resources within the African American community, as holdovers from slavery. Still other women brought into the conversation the impact that slavery has had in their communities related to access and power. Clearly, Racial Identity Theory allowed the women to bring forward the realities of “the historical and cultural factors associated with African Americans' experiences in the United States” (Sellers, et al., 1998, p. 19).

**Intersectionality**

Crenshaw (1989), Black feminist legal scholar, offered a “provisional concept to demonstrate the inadequacy of approaches which separate systems of oppression, isolating and focusing on one, while occluding the others” (Mapping1244-5, n9). This concept is known as Intersectionality. Collins (2000), suggested that intersectionality highlights the interwoven complexities of race, gender, class and sexuality constituting intersecting oppressions. Collins (2000) further offered that these “intersectional paradigms remind us that oppression cannot be reduced to one fundamental type, and that oppressions work together in producing injustice” (p. 21). Intersectionality was evident across many of this study’s themes.
Reflecting on the women’s core identities, intersectionality provided a concept through which the women made meaning of their executive leadership experiences. Specifically, many of the women described having to embrace multiple identities. One woman shared how she had to figuratively “wear several lenses” depending upon the audience with whom she was engaging. Other women shared their multiple roles of being an executive and also a mom, daughter, wife and sister. Another woman acknowledged and embraced the fact that because of her reputation, she has had to lead with particular labels such as “bitch.” Some women spoke to the relevance of their family’s class status as they shared they “were immigrants” and thus their children were “first generation Americans.” Still other women shared that their parents were from the “very poor working class.” These specific examples, show how “class inextricably define[d] their race and gender,” (Purdie-Vaughns & Eibach, 2008, p. 378). Some of the women owned the fact that they check a lot of boxes. Intersectionality shows how “multiple, co-constituting analytic categories are operative and equally salient in constructing institutionalized practices and lived experiences” (Carastathis, 2014, p.307).

In speaking to institutionalized practices, the experience of prejudiced standards created lived experiences for the women where multiple identities overlapped. For example, some of the women described their experiences related to their intersecting identities of gender and race requiring harder and higher expectations for them as African American women, as they carried out their executive leadership roles. Some of the participants spoke specifically to the experiences being an African American female executive leader in a nonprofit, being quite different than that of their White female leaders. This experience of ‘double jeopardy,’ (Beale, 1970; Berdahl & Moore, 2006)
where African American women are burdened with the hardships connected with being both female and African American, again shows how the women were faced with the realities of intersectionality.

Much of the burden of being connected to multiple oppressive categories falls on African American women. According to Banks (2019), African American female’s lived experiences in the United States offer perhaps the most devastating proof of the constant and unending toil from gender and race discrimination. One woman spoke to her family’s direct connection with slavery and their class status, as she shared that her “father’s parents were sharecroppers.” Many of the women described the impact of slavery as the women lived into their executive leadership experiences as African American women. Some of the women also highlighted how slavery’s hands had played a part in the issues related to pay equity, access and opportunities. While, one woman acknowledged the impact of this country’s role in slavery creating unequal access to power, influence and thus unequal playing fields for leaders of color. Intersectionality required the women to acknowledge their lived experiences within interlocking systems of oppressions of race and gender and for some class. The next section addresses whether the research question was answered and offers insights of the study based on prior interpretations.

**Addressing the Research Question**

The guiding question of this study was: *How do African American female executives make sense of their leadership experiences in the nonprofit industry in the United States?* The women in this study provided unique interpretations of who they were as individuals, as well as who they were within the context of their familial, personal and professional relationships. They made sense of their own self-image, impact
within the community, challenges as leaders of nonprofit organizations and the barriers often placed in their way, while living into their executive leadership roles. Although the depth and energy of the experiences shared by the women were multifaceted, four overarching themes emerged: Identity: Who They Are, Community Support, The Context: Industry Complexities and Obstacles to Leadership.

**Identity: Who They Are**

In identity theory, the essence of an identity is the classification of the self as an inhabitant of a role, and the assimilation, into the self, of the significances and expectations connected with that role and its occurrence (Burke & Tully, 1977; Thoits, 1986). Role identity theorists have concentrated on the coordination between the particular meanings associated with a distinct role and the behaviors that an individual presents in that role while engaging with others (Burke, 1980; Burke & Reitzes, 1981). This relationship shows how identity is focused on interconnected individuality. However, though connected, when it comes to how the individual sees themselves, self-esteem is seen as an influencing factor (Stryker, 1980). Specifically, if the role was evaluated supportively, the individual’s self-esteem would be greater (Hoelter, 1986). While some of the participants shared their frustration with having to deal with others frequently questioning and discounting their professional expertise, other participants embraced their own professional worth as empowered by their mother/father or their own self-motivation.

Wallace and Wong (1975) posit that family is a central component of the African American sociocultural tradition. Further as discussed by Littlejohn-Blake and Darling (1993), the family unit offers a way for African Americans to voice their pride via shared
morals, resources and principles of behavior. The women in this study highlighted the impact of their families in contributing to their identities. Some of the participants shared the impact of their mothers as their role models in defining their career paths and their focus on social activism. While, other participants focused on their fathers as their role models who helped them see their self-worth and own their unique place in the world. Still other participants celebrated their family’s immigrant statuses. Overall, their maternal and paternal foundations offered empowering relationships for them to express their identities.

At the core of identity is an embrace of one’s self-efficacy. All of the women in this study held a firm embrace of their strengths, multiple identities and individual values-systems. Some of the participants owned their strength of being established executives; while others embraced their foundational values of common sense and spirituality. Still other women proudly celebrated their African American femaleness. However, it was evident for the majority of the women that they represented several interconnected identities, all of them working together to define their executive leadership experiences. Ultimately, their identity was all-encompassing and often unchanging across groups, positions and circumstances (Burke & Stets, 2009).

**Community Support**

African American women in the United States share a collective knowledge and consciousness connected to their communal history and common experiences (Alinia, 2015). This philosophy stems from Black Feminist Thought/Theory (BFT) and its core of empowering African American women to define their unique realities according to their own conditions (Collins, 2000). As it relates to this theme, Black Feminist
Thought/Theory (BFT) and its focus on “relationships between the individual and society, or between human agency and social structures,” (Alinia, 2015, p. 2334) was brought to life. Collins (2000) further posited that the shared values of African American women create a sense of community and provide meaning to their unique lived stories.

According to Brown and Keith (2003), African American women’s roles within the African American community are critical in sustaining the dynamic systems of familial and non-familial networks. The strength of these relationships is most often experienced within African American female connections. Brown and Keith (2003) further confirmed the importance of these associations when they shared that, “an invaluable source of support for African American women is that derived from the friendships they share with other Black women” (p. 243) The majority of the women in this study highlighted that they were a part of a supportive “sister circle.” Other women shared the intentionality of supporting other African American women. It was clear that the women in this study embraced the research that supports the importance of friendship in providing emotional care (Taylor, Chatters & Jackson, 1997).

While it is clear there is intentionality among African American women to nurture sister relationships, there is conversely the harsh realities of African American women seeing each other as competition. Specifically, as shared by Lorde (2007) there is this sense of there being only a controlled quantity of freedom to be allocated amongst the women, with the “largest and juiciest pieces of liberty going as spoils to the victor or the stronger” (p. 51). Ultimately Lorde (2007) says, the women find themselves fighting for the biggest piece of the pie. Lorde (2007) further shares, there is this belief that by asserting themselves, somehow this is an attack on the other or that one’s self-definition
will interfere with the other’s ability to self-define. Consequently, African American women find themselves with an innate desire to support and empower on another, while also struggling with the fear of somehow giving up their own seat at the table.

Focused on supporting the community, Ralston (1997) stated, “Black women’s sociohistory also shows a collective industriousness and a desire for individual, family, and community development, as demonstrated by their progress in educational attainment and their work to enhance community well-being” (p. 276). As shared by Harris (1998), there is a commitment to one’s community as, “lifting as we climb is still pertinent to women of color, for it acknowledges their need and desires for personal advancement and achievement while connecting them with a collective effort to improve the quality of life for others in the community” (p. 283). The women in this study lived into their support of their communities directly through their staff connections. A few of the women shared that they had a responsibility to and investment in the well-being of their staff; while, other women highlighted the importance of trusting their staff. Collectively, the women were able to show how the community and the individual work together in an interconnected and integrated way (Alinia, 2015).

In living into their communal relationships, there is often a focus on embodying some of the principles of African society embodied in Nguzo Saba. In particular, Umoja/Ujima (Unity/Collective Work and Responsibility); whereby the women were intentional about “establishing and maintaining relationships with others within the community” (Harris, 1998, p. 288). The mutually-beneficial nature of the community relationships exhibited by the women with their staff, offered both the women and their staff an opportunity to “participate in meaningful work toward a common destiny,”
(Harris, 1998, p.288) which was centered on carrying out the missions of their unique nonprofit organizations.

While mentoring is often seen as a mutually-beneficial experience between mentor and mentee, mentoring is generally about the mentee’s experience as it “is developed to promote the professional growth and personal growth of the protégé through coaching, support, and guidance” (Mullen, 1994, p. 259). Some women focused on setting examples as mentors for their daughters. While other women in this study found themselves directly seeking out African American women and women of color to serve as their mentees. Some women shared their appreciation for the opportunities to be mentored, whether by other African American women and even by a White man. The women in this study demonstrated mentorship through their focus on professional and community activities (Brown & Keith, 2003), which further allowed mentorship to show up as “support systems [which] offered…. executive coaching and networking” (Muir, 2014, p.354).

Through the mentor-mentee relationship, there is powerful evidence of the “convergence of “I” and “We” and identifying resources and sharing” (Harris, 1998, p. 290). It was clear that the women not only paid it forward in offering themselves up as mentors to their staff, youth in the community and other African American female executives, but also, the women shared how they too benefited from the experiences of being mentored, whether by other African American women or even White Males. It was through this spirit of mutual benefit that both mentors and mentees often discover, grow and experience shared learnings.
Interestingly, the diametrically-opposed societal statuses of African American females and White males would not seem to be a narrative within these women’s stories, however, as shared by Cherish, she sought out a White male sponsorship relationship as she realized she was “missing a lens of lived experience….I don't have the lived experience of the freedom of being a White man….And so I thought well I need to get someone on the other end and run stuff past them, like how would you tackle this?” For Sandra, she learned from White males through her observation of their behaviors, tactics and actions, as she claimed, “I really learned a lot from White men…That's how White men kind of fight each other in these corporate settings…. I think I've learned how to play the game.” Similarly, Wanda acknowledged because of her labor background, she was often surrounded by all males, in particular White males, and thus intentional about being in “a space where I can shift power.” As a result, she was laser-focused on engaging with White males as they were the ones with the power. While this White male sponsorship narrative was not shared across the nine women, its presence was evident and thus something to consider as impacting African American female executive’s leadership experiences within nonprofit organizations.

The Context: Industry Complexities

According to McKeever (2020), in 2016 there were roughly 1.54 million nonprofits recorded with the Internal Revenue Service (IRS). These nonprofits provided approximately $1.047.2 trillion to the United States economy, representing 5.6 percent of the United States gross domestic product (GDP), in 2016 (McKeever, 2020). Yet even with such a substantial contribution to the economy and the majority of the individuals served by nonprofits consisting of minority populations, there remains a considerable
absence of African Americans, in particular African American women, in executive leadership positions of nonprofit organizations (Taylor, 2018).

As articulated by the Internal Revenue Service (IRS), whether an organization is a nonprofit or a for-profit is determined by the tax status issued to the organization by the IRS; consequently, nonprofits form in similar ways as for-profit organizations (Leonard, 2019). Further, as contributed by Harper (2016), nonprofits have to have more funds coming in than going out, if they are to operate. Business as usual was the experience that the women in this study had as they led their nonprofit organizations. Some of the women shared that the structure of nonprofits was similar to that of their former for-profit organizations. Still others described the transferability of skills between sectors. One participant directly cited the similar challenges of race and gender issues in both sectors. Generally, the women were able to find more similarities than differences, between the nonprofit and for-profit sectors.

Walsh, Landles-Cobb, and Karlins (2014) shared that it is the Board’s (nonprofit or for-profit) number one priority to successfully manage the senior executive of their organization. However, according to Walsh, Landles-Cobb, and Karlins (2014), nearly 46% of CEOs indicated that they received little or no assistance from their Board of Directors when assuming their new senior executive role. Consistent with this research, the majority of the women in this study similarly acknowledged that they did not receive onboarding by their Board of Directors, upon assuming their Executive Director roles of their nonprofit organizations. Further, one woman shed light on the general lack of inconsistent support received, specifically by people of color, from their Board of
Directors. Clearly, the area of Board Dynamics, is an area where nonprofit boards have work to do.

Nonprofit organizations are created to focus on charitable purposes and generally have a core mission which emphasizes elements that provide assistance to society. Specifically, nonprofits are geared towards “exempt purposes” such as, “charitable, religious, educational, scientific, literary, testing for public safety, fostering national or international amateur sports competition, and preventing cruelty to children or animals” (IRS, 2019). Some women in this study described nonprofits’ focus on supporting the African American community directly, in particular issues that impact this community such as violence, unemployment and lack of jobs. One woman shared her personal experience growing up in a community that engaged directly in philanthropic endeavors. Still other women expressed their intentionality behind building up their African American communities. Finally, some women shed light on the inadequacies of nonprofits not meeting expectations within their communities. It is evident that nonprofit organizations are dynamic and multifaceted organizations with much expected of them, yet often unable to fulfill the expectations of the communities for which they are set up to serve.

Organizational inadequacies are common within nonprofit organizations, which often hinder their efficiency (Kramer & Stid, 2015) in meeting the needs of their communities. A few of the women in this study articulated their experiences with infrastructure issues found within their nonprofit organizations. Other women shared issues related to lack of nonprofit accountability in the sector as a whole. Still some women spoke to the hegemonic and patriarchal systems found within nonprofit
organizations. The structural deficiencies and male-dominated environments within nonprofit organizations continue to be a challenge for creating spaces where African American women are welcome, let alone positioned for success.

**Obstacles to Leadership**

Kunreuther and Thomas-Breitfeld (2017) assert there are underlying obstacles within nonprofits related to prejudiced assumptions about race and what a leader should look like, which prevent qualified, skilled and talented people of color from leading within nonprofit organizations. Wallace (2019) contends as a leader of color, how you show up, where you are from, who you represent, and your lived experiences are not often accepted. Research has consistently shown that leaders of color experience covert and overt barriers and obstacles throughout their leadership journeys.

Observed racial discrimination is described as a minority individual’s experience of inequitable treatment centered on racial bias and ethnocentrism (Jackson, Brown & Kirby 1998). When highlighting the experience of African Americans specifically, Williams et al. (1997b) assert that as it relates to Whites, African Americans experience greater unjust treatment and discrimination. Specifically, research suggests that African American women face more unmerited treatment, presented as racism and implicit bias, than White women (Schulz et al. 2000). Some of the women in this study expressed the realities of these injustices tied to being African American. One woman offered her truth related to the burden of always having to do more and be more, while simultaneously being disregarded. Some of the women highlighted how the intersection of identities required more of them. Still other women were direct in sharing that their leadership journeys were subject to a different set of standards than their White counterparts. One
woman offered that in general, African American women always received the hardest jobs. It is apparent that the leadership realities of African American women are unique and not like any other minority group.

Kendall (2002) surmised that “White privilege is an institutional (rather than personal) set of benefits granted to those of us who, by race, resemble the people who dominate the powerful positions in our institutions” (p.1). In the case of the women in this study, some of the women shared how White privilege showed up in their executive leadership experiences. For example, one woman acknowledged that her leadership experience was different because of White privilege. While another woman recognized that White privilege showed up in both the nonprofit and for-profit sectors. Still another woman recognized that often White female privilege goes unrecognized due to their inability to see oppression outside of their own oppression. As White privilege remains embedded in our society today, White people must choose to either “continue to use unearned privilege to remain ignorant, or [they] can determine to put aside [their] opacities in order to see clearly and live differently” (Kendall, 2002, p. 11).

When implicit bias is evident within organizations, its effects can impact decisions related to hiring, promotions, training and the distribution of other benefits within the workplace. According to Hutchinson (2020), “implicit bias refers to unconscious bias—unintentional stereotypes, assumptions, or generalizations that influence our actions and judgment” (p. 1). One woman in this study shared about the gender bias she encountered due to the assumed masculinity tied to her name. Another woman recounted her experience with racial bias due to her name sounding too ethnic. While other women described their experiences with ethnic or cultural bias tied to their
African American hair. Still some of the women called out the institutionalized racism they encountered within the nonprofit sector as a whole. Consequently, the lived experiences of these African American female executives were often faced with implicit and racial biases which were woven into their nonprofit leadership experiences.

For centuries, back to slavery, the United States’ “political strategy of divide, demonize, and conquer” (Alexander, 2020, p. xiv) has been in existence. However as pinned by Abraham Lincoln, “where slavery is there liberty cannot be; and where liberty is there slavery cannot be” (Sumner, 1864). The women in this study often connected the hindrances experienced in their leadership experiences to the remnants of slavery. Some of the women described the impact that slavery has had on keeping the African American community individually-focused versus community-focused and thus always in competition with one another. Other women offered insight into how slavery has created a scarcity of resources within the communities their nonprofit organizations were serving. Some of the women connected slavery to issues related to equity and access. Finally, one woman acknowledged how slavery created an unequal playing field related to power, influence and access. While the women managed to lead in the midst of slavery, it remains a reality that we continue to experience “a culturally honed racial prejudice that is a part of the social construct of the modern America we find ourselves in today” (Fisher, 2017, p. 1).

The dynamic and lived experiences of the women in this study were evident across all of the themes and subthemes. Sensemaking as a process was unmistakable as the women came “to comprehend, understand, explain, attribute, extrapolate, and predict” (Starbuck & Milliken, 1988, p. 51) their worlds as African American female executives.
within the nonprofit industry. Embedded in the meaning making process, identity was manifest in how the women made sense of who they were in relation to others with whom they engaged (Kenny et al., 2011). Their unique identities were fully experienced as it connected to the women’s identity within the realm of Black Feminist Thought/Theory (BFT). With its focus on empowering African American women within oppressive contexts, BFT formed a foundational platform upon which the women created their lived experiences. Clearly as African American women, their race was always first. Racial Identity Theory, in particular the underground approach, facilitated the women being able to own their unique African American experiences within their nonprofit contexts. Embracing their African Americanness and Femaleness impacted how they showed up as leaders. Through Leader Identity Theory, the women were able to live into their executive leadership roles as they engaged in individual, interpersonal, and shared relationships (Day & Harrison, 2007; Lord & Hall, 2005). While it was evident that the women managed multiple identities dependent upon their diverse roles and environments (Ashforth & Johnson, 2001), overall, the women fully embraced and gave meaning to their overlapping identities. The next section offers overall conclusions based upon this chapter’s interpretations.

In alignment with the data presented through the participant interviews, there were several conclusions connected to sensemaking, identity, executive leadership, African American women and ultimately intersectionality. Sensemaking as a process provided a dynamic way through which the women shaped their executive leadership experiences. Sensemaking involved the women understanding and giving meaning to their experiences, acting upon them and at times enhancing their understanding or
rejecting their understanding and thus ultimately creating new realities based upon their unique nonprofit environments.

Through sensemaking, who the women were was uncovered. Identity is powerful and multi-dimensional as it connects who the women were as individuals, as members of their families, communities, organizations and society as a whole. In exploring the women’s identities, the totality of their values, experiences, and self-observations were brought together as they owned their executive leadership roles.

In speaking about their executive leadership roles, it was clear that despite the circumstances, obstacles or challenges they faced, the women embraced their executive leader roles and persevered. As the women believed in their own leadership abilities, they were able to fully live into the duties and responsibilities associated with making meaning of being a nonprofit executive.

African Americanness and Femaleness were integral to how the women made sense of their executive leadership journeys. As African Americans, the women passionately owned this unique and often distressed status of their race within society. In addition, as females, the women were empowered to be unapologetic about their femininity. Specifically, they were often intentional about using their voice and living into their strengths as African American women, in a society that consistently oppressed their nature.

While research continues to grapple with intersectionality as a concept or a metaphor, the realities of the interconnected nature of how their race, gender and for some class intersected as they lived into their executive leadership experiences within the
nonprofit industry, was unmistakable. Intersectionality is a reality these women will continue to face as they are a unique group of women who are set apart due to the inseparable histories of oppression connected to their race and gender.

How these women made sense of their unique lived experiences was contingent upon the signals they received from various intersecting environments (Evans, 2007). The mention of making sense is embedded in Weick’s definition of sensemaking, specifically, sensemaking is unique to a particular values-heavy setting. As shared by the nine participants, there was an undeniable intentionality of giving meaning to their unique experiences as African American female executives within their nonprofit contexts. Figure 5.1 below offers a visual representation of the relationship between sensemaking and key findings.

The dual rotating arrows at the center of the figure speak to sensemaking as the core process through which the women in this study made meaning around their unique lived experiences. The orange pie piece of oppression as a historic and institutionalized system of hindrance, was often a daily reality the women experienced as executives. The gray pie piece of intersectionality, as the real concept or metaphor through which the women experienced living within multiple intersecting identities, showed up across many of the core themes the women spoke to related to their executive leadership experiences. The blue pie piece of sisterhood, in particular African American sisterhood, as an incomparable and intentional relationship the women built or sought out, provided many of the women with the supportive spaces for making sense of their executive leadership challenges. The yellow pie piece of unique experiences speaks to the articulated and real
differences these African American women experienced in living into their experiences as executives of nonprofit organizations.

While Figure 5.1 shows four dominant expressions of the overall themes for the majority of the women in this study, the individual pie pieces don’t converge as these expressions did not always intersect nor overlap, rather they were, in and of themselves, particularly significant in the women’s lived experiences as African American Female Executives within their unique nonprofit contexts. The following section offers recommendations for future research and practice.

Figure 5.1

*Visual Representation of the Overall Themes*
Recommendations

Recommendations for Research

**Recommendation 1: Recognize, Focus on and Eliminate intentional obstacles.** Same story different context. Although the nonprofit industry is set up to serve majority minority communities, consisting of often African American female populations, African American female executive leaders are markedly absent from these roles across nonprofit organizations (Taylor, 2018). Even with the #MeToo movement’s impact evidenced in the many minority female leaders elected to Congress in 2019, the struggle of African American females claiming their spot in the terminal positions of nonprofit organizations continues to be faced with silent chants of “not yet, not quite, something’s still missing.” Future research could focus more intentionally on identifying, targeting and removing the often-impenetrable barriers, such as implicit bias, racism, White privilege, to African American female ascension into the executive leadership roles within nonprofit organizations.

**Recommendation 2: Investigate the significance of prior roles impacting executive leadership ascension for African American females.** Future research could also focus on determining whether or not particular prior roles may lead to an increased likelihood of African American females moving into executive leadership roles within nonprofit organizations. Specifically, if whether or not an African American female who held a prior VP or Director role, would more likely set them up for a move into the senior executive seat. While it is clear that African American females are scant in the executive leadership roles within nonprofit organizations, it would be of interest to know whether holding particular prior leadership positions impacted their career progression.
Recommendation 3: Explore the relevance of size of nonprofit upon the impact of 
African American females securing executive leadership roles within the nonprofit 
industry. As research suggests the nonprofit organizations with the biggest budgets are 
less likely to have a woman at the top (Guerrero, 2020), further research could consider 
whether the type of nonprofit (in terms of budgetary size) had any impact on whether or 
ot not an African American female would be considered as one of the women to lead such a 
nonprofit. Clearly people of color, in particular African American females, have the 
talent, skill and interest in leading (Kunreuther & Thomas-Breitfeld, 2017). As a result, 
identifying the relevance of the size of the nonprofit may afford these women realistic 
and credible entry into the executive leadership positions of nonprofit organizations.

Recommendation 4: Examine the impact White male support has upon African 
American female executive leadership progression. Future research could also consider 
the role that White males play in elevating the voices of this group of women who appear 
to be on opposite ends of the privilege spectrum as they are. Specifically, a couple of the 
women in this study were transparent about the fact that White men had acted as their 
best supporters and champions throughout their executive leadership journeys. As offered 
by Collins (2000), the unique “histories of U.S. White men and African-American 
women are linked, socially construct each other” (p. 267) and thus encourage an 
opportunity where White men can lean into some unique areas in support of African 
American female executives within this industry. Further still, in recognizing the truth 
that nearly 70% of the executive positions within the nonprofit industry are still held by 
White males (Thomas-Breitfeld & Kunreuther, 2017), this majority group could offer 
insight into how to change the narrative and bring not just the voices of African
American females to the podium, but their executive leadership to nonprofit organizations.

**Recommendation 5: Further exploration of BFT within the context of nonprofit organizations.** With its focus on empowering African American females to lead within oppressive environments, and with it being missing from the research directly related to nonprofit organizations, a continued discovery of Black Feminist Thought/Theory (BFT) could elevate the lived experiences of this group of women. Specifically, as it relates to African American female executive leadership experiences within nonprofit organizations, continued unpacking of how BFT shows up within this context could be beneficial in keeping the unique experiences and challenges of African American female executives in the forefront.

**Recommendation 6: Continued discovery of the concept of intersectionality within the nonprofit industry.** Finally, future research should continue to explore the concept or metaphor of intersectionality as it relates to the realities of the interlocking systems of oppression of race, gender and class which speak to the daily lived experiences of African American female executives of nonprofit organizations. As shared by one of this study’s participants, “I cannot separate the fact that I’m African American and leading this organization.” Further as shared by another participant, “….one being African American and two being a female, I was held to higher and quicker results.” Still another participant offered, “…the[re’s] [a] shadow side of the nonprofit sector with regards to being not just a woman, but being a Black woman.” This group of women’s lived experiences continue to highlight the challenges of their interwoven identities and future
research could offer them the avenue to fully live into, express and educate others about their unique voices within this industry.

**Recommendations for Practice**

**Recommendation 1: Bring the elephant front and center.** In order to guarantee the voices of these African American female executives are heard, nonprofit organizations must ensure they put the conversation about racism, implicit bias and White privilege on the table and name it. In particular, as African American professional women are often in positions to serve White bosses (Collins, 2000), as shared by (Wyllie, 2018), nonprofit organizations cannot just talk the talk about diversity and inclusion, they must speak intentionally about implicit bias and racism’s overall impact on society from the Board down. Change can only come when we name the obstruction.

**Recommendation 2: Ensure African American female executives are provided the necessary and known access and invitations.** Once a nonprofit organization has recruited leaders of color, it is incumbent upon the leadership of the nonprofit organization to ensure they provide them with the access to the tools, networks, people and resources they need for success (Kunreuther & Thomas-Breitfeld, 2017). With access, it is then critical that leadership, in particular Boards and leaders, line up the invitations to the right people, in the right spaces and places for their African American female executives.

**Recommendation 3: Create a line-item within the organizational budget to support DEI initiatives.** Show them the money. Besides the benefits that diversity provides such as improved profitability, enhanced creativity and more thoughtful problem-solving capacities (Eswaran, 2019), Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) as a part of the
operational budget offers true commitment to enhancing the face and impact of organizations. True dedication to Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI), as a core strategic value of the organization, is shown by the Board and the leadership of the organization demonstrating complete buy-in to the processes and directing the processes, so much so, that the DEI efforts are a line item on the balance sheet (Wyllie, 2018).

**Recommendation 4: Ensure organizational training and accountability.** Once you have faced the elephant, shared access and built DEI into the budget, it is imperative that from the Board down, all parties are trained on and fully execute DEI and Implicit Bias practices. With the acknowledgement of the systemic obstacles imposed upon African American females within organizations, recruitment, hiring, training, promotion and other Human Resources practices should be in alignment with the organization’s focus or re-focus on preventing future instances of racism, sexism or implicit bias from creeping into the systems and operations of the nonprofit organization.

**Recommendation 5: Support African American female executives by setting them up for success.** With the maze of oppressive systems working against African American female executives, it is critical to ensure they have the personal and professional support they need as they must combat being shut out, shut down, diminished, discredited and used up within their workplaces. Leaders of color, in particular African American females, could particularly benefit from learning distinct ways to navigate and tackle the biases and systems they face as they ascend their leadership ladders. Further, as African American women often receive immeasurable support from their “sister circles,” these executive leaders should be encouraged to seek out these relationships to offer strength,
counsel and safe spaces to share their lived experiences as African American female executives of nonprofit organizations.

**Recommendation 6: Be the Ally.** While protecting, encouraging and valuing the significance of African American female “sister circles” is critical to supporting African American female executives, those with whom the power lies, can live into an allyship relationship for their African American female leaders, in particular. According to Nicole Nfonoyim-Hara (2016) through the Rochester Racial Justice Toolkit, “allyship is a proactive, ongoing, and incredibly difficult practice of unlearning and re-evaluating, in which a person of privilege works in solidarity and partnership with a marginalized group of people to help take down the systems that challenge that group's basic rights, equal access, and ability to thrive in our society” (p. 1). As an ally, those in power can use their privilege to elevate the needs of these executives to be given the opportunity to lead without oppressive obstacles, systems, practices and unspoken rules. Ultimately, allyship is about building bridges of validation, trust, respect and humanity; values which this group of African American female executives, have been denied within the nonprofit industry.

**Summary**

The purpose of this narrative inquiry qualitative study was to understand the executive leadership experience of African American females within nonprofit organizations. Specifically, the study sought to explore how African American female EDs/CEOs made sense of their leadership journeys. Through the two interviews of each of the nine participants, who were employed by nonprofit organizations within the United States, the study tackled the guiding question of: *How do African American female*
executives make sense of their leadership experiences in the nonprofit industry in the United States?

The women in this study brought to life their unique, lived experiences as they made sense of their worlds as African American female executives within the nonprofit industry. Four principal themes emerged from the data: Identity: Who They Are, Community Support, The Context: Industry Complexities and Obstacles to Leadership. Findings offered insights into interpretations related to sensemaking, identity, executive leadership, African American women and ultimately intersectionality. Sensemaking as a process offered the women in this study a dynamic way to construct their executive leadership experiences. Sensemaking created pathways for the women to understand, give meaning to and ultimately create their unique realities. Women in this study lived into their distinct yet multi-layered identities as they brought to life their individual, familial, community, organizational and societal identities. Despite the obstacles woven into their leadership experiences, the women possessed the qualities and abilities to persevere and live into their executive positions within their nonprofit communities. The women fully owned their African Americanness and Femaleness as core components of their unique roles and status within society. Further, the women were intentional about using their voices to live into their strengths as African American women. Ultimately, who the women were could not be confined to only one identity, as their realities consistently supported them living out their experiences through the intersection of their multiple systems of oppressions connected to the interwoven nature of their race, gender, and for some class.
As a result of the interpretations, future directions for both research and practice were offered. Future research could continue to focus on identifying, targeting and removing the continued barriers to African American ascension into the executive leadership roles within nonprofit organizations. Further, future research could also focus on determining whether or not particular prior roles may lead to an increased likelihood of African American females moving into executive leadership roles within nonprofit organizations. Further still, research could consider whether the type of nonprofit (in terms of budgetary size) has any impact on whether or not an African American female would be considered as one of the women to lead such a nonprofit. Future research could also consider the role that White males play in elevating the voices of this group of women who appear to be on opposite ends of the privilege spectrum as they are, which connects directly to their unique relationship within Black Feminist Thought/Theory (BFT) and could be beneficial in keeping the unique experiences and challenges of African American female executives in the fore-front in the nonprofit industry. Finally, future research should continue to explore the concept or metaphor of intersectionality as it relates to the realities of the interlocking systems of oppression of race, gender, sexuality and class which speak to the daily lived experiences of African American female executives of nonprofit organizations. Recommendations for practice include nonprofit organizations ensuring they put the conversation about racism on the table and name it. Further, it is incumbent upon the Board and leadership of nonprofit organizations to ensure they provide African American female executives with the access to the tools, networks, people and resources they need for success. Also, the Board and leadership of nonprofit organizations must have complete buy-in to Diversity Equity and
Inclusion (DEI) processes and direct the processes, so much so, that the DEI efforts are a line item on the balance sheet. It is also imperative that from the Board down, all parties are trained on and fully execute DEI and Implicit Bias practices. Further, it is critical to ensure African American female executives have the personal and professional support they need as they must combat being shut out, shut down, diminished, discredited and used up within their workplaces. Finally, it is beneficial to explore allyship as a way to be the-bridge to elevate the silenced, yet relevant lived experiences of African American female executives within the nonprofit industry.
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Appendices

Appendix A-Invitation to Participate

Alicia Williams <aliciadenise14@gmail.com>
Hello XXX-
Thank you for the opportunity to gain your perspective into how African American female executives make sense of their leadership experiences within the Nonprofit Industry.

To begin this journey, if you could please answer the below prescreening questions, that will help get our process started:

Full Name-
Age-
Phone Number-
Email-
Race/Ethnicity-
Gender-
Employer (if applicable)-
Current Role (if applicable)-
State-

If you choose to participate in my study, there will be two-1 ½ hour interviews and a possible 15-minute follow-up telephone/Zoom/Skype conversation. The interviews will be audio taped so that I can accurately reflect on our discussion and capture all relevant points. The tapes will be transcribed and then will no longer be used. Your participation in this study is confidential, yet the results will be published for future use. Your identity will not be revealed and there will not be any cost for participating in this study. Taking part in this study is your decision and you may decide to not answer any question which you are not comfortable answering.

If this sounds like a project in which you can participate, please do respond back to me by XXXXX.

You may reach me via this email account, via my mobile (832-640-0883) or via my home phone (703-646-5112).

Thank you for your consideration.
Alicia D.
Appendix B – Interview Protocol

INTERVIEW 1

Purpose: To gather information related to the life histories and background related to becoming/becoming a nonprofit executive.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Relevance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Define Becoming and Being.</td>
<td>Questions 1-14: Background/Life History &amp; overall experiences as a nonprofit executive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. What made you choose the nonprofit industry?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Can you tell me about when you first became an executive of a nonprofit organization?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Can you describe your onboarding experience?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. What experiences and relationships have you found most helpful in becoming a nonprofit executive?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Can you identify if anyone helped you become a nonprofit executive?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. If so, what did you learn from the people who helped you become a nonprofit executive?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. How would you describe your experience becoming a nonprofit executive?</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>8. What stories have you heard others tell about becoming a nonprofit executive?</td>
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<tr>
<td>9. After hearing the stories, what stories will you tell others about becoming a nonprofit executive?</td>
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<tr>
<td>10. What did you most enjoy/dread about becoming a nonprofit executive?</td>
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<tr>
<td>11. What experiences and relationships have you found most helpful in being a nonprofit executive?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Can you identify if anyone helped you be a nonprofit executive?</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. If so, what did you learn from the people who helped you be a nonprofit executive?</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>13. How would you describe your experience being a nonprofit executive?</td>
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<tr>
<td>14. What did you most enjoy/dread about being a nonprofit executive?</td>
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INTERVIEW 2

Purpose: To discover how the participants made sense of their experiences within the nonprofit industry as African American female leaders.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Relevance</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. What perceptions did you hold about female executive leadership roles within nonprofit organizations, before you became an executive yourself?</td>
<td>Question 1: Feminist Theory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Once you became a nonprofit female executive, how did your perceptions change, if at all?</td>
<td>Questions 2-3: Deeper Sensemaking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. What role if any has your gender played in your executive leadership journey in nonprofit organizations?</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. What perceptions did you hold about African American executive leadership roles within nonprofit organizations?</td>
<td>Question 4: Racial Identity Theory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Once you became an African American nonprofit executive, how did your perceptions change, if at all?</td>
<td>Questions 5-6: Deeper Sensemaking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. What role if any has your race played in your executive leadership journey in nonprofit organizations?</td>
<td>Question 7: Intersectionality &amp; Leader Identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. How do you understand your African American female executive leadership experience relative to your peers’ experience?</td>
<td>Questions 8-9: Future research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. If different, to what do you attribute the difference?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. If not, why not?</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>8. How have these leadership experiences shaped you as a leader?</td>
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<tr>
<td>9. Is there anything else you feel would be important for me to know about your experience as an African American female nonprofit executive?</td>
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</table>
Appendix C–Participant Consent Form

Exploring African American Female Executives’ Leadership Experiences within Non-Profit Organizations

IRB # NCR191299

Principal Investigator: Shaista E. Khilji, PhD, 202-994-1146
Doctoral Candidate: Alicia Williams, 832-640-0883

INTRODUCTION

You are invited to take part in a research study conducted by Alicia Williams under the direction of Dr. Shaista E. Khilji of the Department of Human and Organizational Learning in the Graduate School of Education and Human Development at The George Washington University.

First, we want you to know that taking part in this research is entirely voluntary. You may choose not to take part, or you may withdraw from this study at any time. You will receive no benefit from taking part in this study. This research may give us knowledge about how African American Female Executives Make Sense of their Leadership Experiences within the Non-Profit Industry. Before you decide to take part, please take as much time as you need to ask any questions and discuss this study with colleagues, family or friends.

ABOUT THE RESEARCH

You are being asked to take part in this study because you are viewed as an African American Executive within the Non-Profit Industry based in the United States.

The purpose of this study is to contribute expand Black Feminist Thought/Theory (BFT) within the Non-Profit Industry. The main research question guiding this study is:

How do African American female executives make sense of their leadership experiences in the nonprofit industry in the United States?

The interviews will focus on experiences as African American female executives (including what is satisfying and what is the most challenging), being identified as African American female executives, how your childhood and adulthood experiences shaped your present life as African American female executives and how you made sense of your multiple identities and leadership identity.

The research will be conducted through interviews with you either at an office location convenient for you or via telephone/Zoom/Skype in whichever manner and location that
provides a quiet, comfortable place for you. An estimate of 8-10 participants will be interviewed for this study.

WHAT IS INVOLVED IN THIS STUDY?

The total amount of time you will spend in this study is 3hrs and 15 minutes. Three (3) hours of that time will be spent in the interviews. A possible additional 15 minutes of time may be spent in follow-up by phone or e-mail to discuss findings and questions with you. The follow-up contact would be within two months of your interview.

If you choose to take part in this study, this is what will happen.

The Interviews:
- You will participate in two-1½ hour interviews about your experiences as African American female executives.
- The interview will be audio-recorded only with your permission. You will be asked again at the time of the interview to give your verbal permission to participate in the study and to be taped. Your permission will be recorded in response to the statement “Please state ‘yes’ if you are comfortable with this interview being tape recorded.” If you do not feel comfortable with the interview being taped, the interviewer will take notes during the interview.
- Please do not identify yourself by name during the interview. You will be asked to provide a pseudonym of your choice at the time of the interview to remove any identification of your voice with your name.
- The audio files will be kept in a secure place and will be destroyed after the end of the study.
- If you do not feel comfortable with the interview being taped, the interviewer will take notes.

The Follow-Up:
- Not everyone will be contacted for a follow-up conversation.
- If you do not wish to have any follow-up contact, just let the researcher know and you will not be contacted.
- It is estimated that follow-up conversations will take no more than 15 minutes.
- You may choose whether you would like to be contacted by telephone/Zoom/Skype or by e-mail for follow-up.
- The purpose of the follow-up contact is to discuss aspects of your interview with you or the findings in general after conducting several other interviews.

WHAT ARE THE RISKS OF THE STUDY?

The study has the following risks.

Given the nature of the interview questions, it is not likely that you will feel any stress or discomfort during the interview. You are free to skip any questions or stop the interview at any point.
There is a small chance that someone not on our research team could find out that you took part in the study or somehow connect your name with the information we collect about you, however the following steps are being taken to reduce that risk.

- As described above, a pseudonym will be used in the interview and therefore in the transcription of the interview as well. A hardcopy only (no computer file) key linking your name and the pseudonym as well as the audio files will be locked in a secure location separate from the research materials (transcriptions, data encoding and analysis).
- All computers used for the project will be password protected as will the software.
- When results of this research study are reported in journals or at scientific meetings, the people who take part are not named or identified. Direct quotes may be published from the research and if so, the quotes will be cited with the participant’s chosen pseudonym.
- GWU will not release any information about your research involvement without your written permission, unless required by law.
- At the end of the project all material with identifiable data will be destroyed.

ARE THERE BENEFITS TO TAKING PART IN THE STUDY?

The benefits to society focus on the contributions to expanding Black Feminist Thought/Theory (BFT) within the nonprofit industry, as well as using sensemaking as a guide to show how African American female executives make sense of their multiple identities and leadership identity.

WHAT ARE MY OTHER OPTIONS?

You do not have to be in this study if you do not want to.

WHAT IF I CHANGE MY MIND?

You may stop taking part in the study at any time.

WILL I RECEIVE PAYMENT FOR BEING IN THIS STUDY?

You will not receive payment for taking part in this study.

WHAT ARE THE COSTS FOR TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?

Besides the use of your time, taking part in this study will not lead to added costs for you.

PROBLEMS OR QUESTIONS

Research specific questions should be addressed to the principal investigator, Dr. Shaista E. Khilji, at telephone number (202) 994-1146 or e-mail address sekhilji@gwu.edu. The
Office of Human Research of The George Washington University can provide further information about your rights as a research subject: (202) 994-2715.